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Mississippi Mose; or, A Strong Man's Sacrifice.

A TALE OF LOVE, INTRIGUE AND ADVENTURE IN THE SOUTHWEST.

BY EDWARD WILLETT,

AUTHOR OF "ASA SCOTT, THE STEAMBOAT BOY," Etc., Etc.



WITH THE QUICKNESS OF THOUGHT MOSE LIFTED HIS UNSUSPECT ANTAGONIST CLEAR OF THE RAIL, AND THREW HIM FROM THE BOAT.

Mississippi Mose;

OR,

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CHAPTER I.

A MIDNIGHT ENCOUNTER.

WHEN the fine steamer *Star of the West*, on her way from Louisville to New Orleans, had reached a point about midway between the former city and the mouth of the Ohio, her passengers began to become acquainted with each other, and to assume a certain air of sociability, after the manner of Western people on Western steamboats, and two of them who had previously avoided each other at last struck up a conversation.

One of these was a tall, well-built, and fine looking man, neatly dressed, and with the appearance of having had a wide experience in the ways of the world. He was particularly noticeable by reason of his black hair and beard—almost suspiciously black—in strange contrast with his eyes, which were unmistakably of a grayish blue.

This gentleman—judging him to be a gentleman by his appearance and his manner—had a way of making friends that soon impressed itself upon his fellow passengers, and his dignified cordiality made him a general favorite. Consequently he had an abundance of invitations to partake of stimulants at the bar, and to take part in "quiet games" of cards in the Social Hall of the boat. Of the stimulants he partook sparingly; but he joined in the games with evident relish, showing by the dextrous style of his shuffling and dealing the results of long practice.

But there was nothing in his play to indicate that he was a professional gambler. He was unwilling to play for anything but small stakes, and he did not win more frequently than ordinary runs of luck would have justified.

Yet it might be that he was feeling his way and biding his time.

This stately favorite was registered at the clerk's office as Preston Mosher, and for some unexplained reason the title of colonel was generally prefixed to his name by the passengers.

The other of the two persons mentioned was a man whose personal appearance strongly contrasted with that of the colonel.

He was short and thick-set, neither graceful nor handsome. His head was covered with a shock of cropped sandy hair; a stubby beard of the same objectionable hue disfigured, rather than ornamented, his cheeks and chin and upper lip, and his small gray eyes were overtopped by heavy and bushy eyebrows; but the most marked peculiarity of his features was their extreme paleness, which was rendered more striking by a few very evident freckles. The predominating expression of his countenance was that of shrewdness mingled with suspicion. He was coarsely dressed, and his appearance was generally slouchy and countrified.

Nobody took the trouble to notice that the name of this person was entered on the clerk's register as Benjamin Sharpless, and no title was bestowed upon him. He made no friends among the passengers, neither seeking them nor being sought by them.

It has been said that these two men avoided each other; but the expression is rather too strong. There was that in the manner of Col. Mosher which repelled familiarity on the part of those whose acquaintance he did not care to cultivate, and Sharpless made no attempt to intrude upon the magnate of the Social Hall.

Yet he undoubtedly manifested a decided interest in Colonel Mosher. His keen gray eyes followed that gentleman wherever he went, and appeared to notice everything he did. If Mosher was engaged in a game of cards, Sharpless was usually in a position that enabled him to see every card that was dealt or played. If Mosher joined his friends in patronizing the bar, Sharpless was there to notice what he drank, and how much. If Mosher was chatting with a friend, Sharpless generally managed to be near enough to hear what was said.

A close observer would have perceived that the colonel was annoyed by this species of inquisition, though he doubtless endeavored to conceal his annoyance. A very close observer, after watching the two men carefully, might have arrived at the conclusion that they were antagonistic in their interests, and that they were bound to come in collision sooner or later. He might even have fancied that they were entered against each other in a deadly contest of courage and skill, muscle and brain.

If this were the case, Sharpless must be supposed to have gone into the struggle with heavy

odds against him, as he seemed to be decidedly inferior to his antagonist in all essential qualities.

It was about ten o'clock at night when they came together, and the first words that passed between them were spoken.

Col. Mosher was for once taking part in no game, and engaged in no conversation, but was seated alone at a table, holding a pack of cards, which he was slowly and absently shuffling by standing them on end and passing them through each other.

Sharpless drew a chair to the table, and seated himself, facing the other.

"You play a nice game of keards, colonel," he remarked.

"Do you think so?" indifferently replied Mosher. "Are you a judge of card-playing?"

"Not what you might call a judge, though I can play a decent hoop pole kind of a game. I wouldn't want to resk much of a pile in playin' ag'in' you, though."

"Fortunately, you are not obliged to play against me," coldly remarked Mosher, to whom the companionship of Sharpless was clearly distasteful.

"P'raps you come from the Blue Grass Kentry?" said Sharpless, in no wise rebuffed by the coolness of the other.

"Perhaps I do."

"Any relation to the Mosher of Breathitt county?"

"I am not acquainted with the Mosher of Breathitt county."

"Mighty nice kentry round Lexin'ton an' Frankfort an' Paris."

"So I have been told."

Sharpless was not getting much out of this examination, but his supply of pertinacity was unlimited.

"I've see'd you playin' with these folks on the boat, colonel," he said, "and I reckoned that you could play a heap sharper game if you wanted to, and they wouldn't stand no show."

"You reckon too much," replied Mosher, with a manifest frown. "I only play for jass-time, and do not pretend to be a fine player."

"Not like one of the profesh'nals, hey? Know any of them fellers?"

"Do you mean lawyers, or doctors?"

"Come, now, colonel; you know what sort of profesh'nals I mean. Seems like I might have see'd you about South Bend, Injianny. Ever been thar?"

"Possibly."

"Never lived there, hey?"

"No," bluntly replied Mosher, to whom this style of inquisition was becoming intolerable.

"Know anythin' of Mount Hope, Ohio?" persisted Sharpless. "Mighty nice place that."

"It ought to be, to deserve the name. Suppose, sir, that I take a turn at questioning you now? I presume that you are a carpenter."

"What makes you think so?"

"Because you handle the gimlet so ably. Were you ever in the penitentiary?"

It was then Sharpless's turn to wince. This pointedly leading question caused a bright red spot to appear on each of his very pale cheeks.

"You insult me," he exclaimed. "My asking a few harmless questions gives you no right to insult me."

"I was trying to be inquisitive," retorted Mosher, "and merely said the first thing that happened to come into my head."

"I ain't stylish enough for you, I reckon, and you don't want any of my company. Well, I can git along without any of yours."

"Glad to hear it," confessed the colonel.

The tormentor arose and walked out of the cabin, and the tormented gave vent to an audible sigh of relief.

"Who is that fellow, colonel?" asked a gentleman, who stepped up and took the vacant chair.

"I don't know," replied Mosher. "Somebody who is very inquisitive, not to say impertinent. One of those people who are so shrewd that they suspect everybody of trying to get the better of them, and so sharp that they are continually falling down and cutting themselves."

"I judged that he was a bore, and that you had choked him off. Suppose that you and I try a few hands of seven-up, at a dollar a game, just to make it interesting."

"I am at your service," answered the colonel, "and will be glad to do something that will take the taste of that fellow out of my mouth."

The game proved to be unusually interesting. Two other passengers joined the colonel and his friend, and the play lasted, with the customary intervals for refreshments, until after midnight. At last the party separated and Colonel Mosher walked down the cabin, past the wheels and out upon the after guards.

He had scarcely stepped out into the air, when he perceived that he was not alone in the locality, which was usually deserted at that time of night.

There were two persons at a little distance from him, a man and a woman. The man was talking in low and earnest tones, and the woman's face was partly turned from him.

"A pair of lovers," muttered Preston Mosher. But the clear and indignant tones of the wo-

man's voice, as she spoke at that instant, told him that it was not a lover's tryst.

"You insult me!" she exclaimed. "You would not dare to do so if you did not know that I am alone and unprotected."

Mosher quickly stepped forward, with the instinctive gallantry that might be expected from a man of his appearance.

"You have insulted the lady," he said. "Get away from here!"

The night was intensely dark, the clouds seeming to mingle with the water, and even the near Indiana shore was invisible; but Mosher saw in the man who turned and faced him the inquisitive person who had lately annoyed him in the forward part of the cabin.

"I haven't insulted her," retorted Sharpless.

"She says that you insulted her," rejoined Mosher, "and I prefer her word to yours. Make yourself scarce, now, or you will get hurt."

The colonel spoke in a low voice, as if unwilling to attract any auditors to this encounter; but his tones were very clear and distinct.

"I take no orders from you," savagely replied Sharpless, who had abandoned his Hoosier twang. "I believe you are sailing under false colors. Who are you, anyhow?"

"None of your business."

"But I mean to know."

With these words Sharpless seized his tall and powerful antagonist, and a struggle ensued which was speedily ended. Brief as it was, its termination left one side of Preston Mosher's face denuded of its heavy black beard, which lay at his feet.

"I know you now," defiantly exclaimed Sharpless, though he was powerless in the grasp of his adversary. "You are Mississippi Mose. I thought as much."

"You know ent'ly too much," hissed Mosher, in tones of suppressed passion, "and your knowledge is going to cost you dearly."

With the quickness of thought Mose lifted his unsuspecting antagonist clear of the rail, and threw him from the boat, out into the night, and down into the dark waters of the Ohio.

CHAPTER II.

"YOU MUST DISAPPEAR!"

THERE was a splash as Sharpless fell into the water—a splash unheard by the pilot in his nest above the texas, unheard by the drowsy deck hands and deck passengers forward, unheard by the engineers and firemen at the throbbing engines and roaring furnaces, unheard by the passengers slumbering in the after cabin, unheard amid the hoarse puffing of the exhaust pipes and the churning of the wheels. In a few seconds the splash was followed by a cry; but the struggling swimmer was then so far astern of the boat that it was but faintly heard even by the man and woman who had so plainly heard the splash.

The woman had not uttered a sound during the brief struggle and its sequel, but stood as if petrified by terror. She did not move until Mosher had gathered up his black beard and replaced it on his cheek. Then he approached her with a bow.

"Permit me to see you into the cabin," he said.

She turned to him with a shudder.

"Did you really throw that man into the river?" she asked, "or did I dream that dreadful scene?"

"I really threw him overboard," replied Mosher, "and he fully deserved a ducking. You need not have the least anxiety concerning him. I know him, and I know that he will easily swim to the Indiana shore, to which we were pretty close when he met with his accident. I am afraid that this occurrence has given you a shock, and you had better go inside."

She followed him into the cabin, and the lights that were burning there gave him the first fair view of her face.

It was a very handsome, intelligent, and highly interesting face—seemingly the face of a girl of nineteen or twenty with dark brown hair, large brown eyes, and a pure blonde complexion. Her features were somewhat irregular, but mobile and full of expression, from which they derived their chief beauty. She was a little above the average height of women, and was neatly and tastefully dressed, with no pretension to elegance.

Preston Mosher started when he saw that face, and stared at her so intently that her eyes dropped before his gaze.

"I beg your pardon," he said, "but your face reminds me forcibly of one with which I was once familiar. I have never seen such a likeness."

"I have been told," she replied, "that I look like my mother; but she died when I was a little child."

"Is it possible that your mother's maiden name was Juliet Mellen?"

"That was her name, and my name is Juliet Mellen Lavanne."

"I am more than glad to have met you. I was well acquainted with your mother before her marriage. Have the kindness to take a seat."

She obeyed him mechanically, but did not look him in the face.

"As a friend of my mother's," she said, "and because you have done me a service, I ought to trust you; but I must confess that I feel afraid of you. Who was that man whom you threw into the river? Why did he call you by such a strange name? And why do you wear that false beard?"

"So you noticed that little accident to my beard?" remarked Mosher, with a smile. "I will answer your questions plainly and truthfully. That man was formerly a thief; he is now a detective. My name is Moses Corson, and I am a gambler by profession. The name of Mississippi Mose, by which that man called me, is a nickname which many people give me. I am known on this boat as Preston Mosher, and I wear a disguise because I have wished to conceal my real person and character, particularly from the man who dropped into the river."

"You have indeed spoken plainly," said the young lady, as she rose from her seat, "and I must terminate this interview. As you are a gambler, and probably a fugitive from justice—"

"Just a moment, Miss Lavanne, if you please. I am not a fugitive from justice, and I have something to show you that may change your opinion. Although you were but a child when your mother died, perhaps you may recognize her handwriting."

"My mother's handwriting? Yes, sir; I would know that."

"Have the kindness, then, to look at this scrap of paper."

Juliet Lavanne took the paper, stepped to the chandelier, and read as follows:

For Juliet Lavanne.

"MY DEAR CHILD: This will be handed to you, if at all, after my death, by Mr. Moses Corson, a gentleman whom I know well, and in whom I have entire confidence. If you ever need a friend and protector, as I fear you will, I am assured that he will be near you, if he lives, and will watch over your welfare for my sake. Never mind what he may have been, or what may be said of him, but trust him as I do, and he will be faithful and true to you, as he has been to me. Accept this as the legacy of

"Your loving and anxious mother,
JULIET LAVANNE."

When Juliet had read this writing, she resumed her seat near Col. Mosher, as he may still be styled, and her surprise was clearly visible in her large brown eyes.

"This is my mother's handwriting," she said, "and I recognize it as coming from her. But when and how did it get into your possession?"

"A long time ago," replied Mosher. "That is, it would be a long time to you, though to me it seems but yesterday. It was inclosed in a letter to myself, which I now hand you."

Juliet took the second letter, and read it carefully. It stated that although the writer had been contented and reasonably happy in her married life, and had secured her rights in George Lavanne's estate after his death, she had reason to fear that her husband's brother, Vaudrey Lavanne, was unfriendly to her, and had designs upon his brother's property. What shape those designs might take after her death, she did not know; but she feared for the welfare of her young daughter, who would necessarily come under the control of her uncle Vaudrey, and she begged Moses Corson, in consideration of his regard for herself, to watch over and protect her child if she should need a friend.

"These are my mother's words," said Juliet, when she had read the letter. "I loved her, and I believe what she says. As she trusted you, I will trust you. What is the danger that threatens me, and what must I do?"

"I can assure you," replied Mosher, "that you have never in your life needed a friend as you now do, and it is to be hoped that you will never again know such pressing need. Just now I advise you to retire to your state-room, and rest until morning."

"I am so excited, that I am afraid I will not be able to sleep."

"At least, Miss Lavanne, you can rest, and in the morning, after breakfast, you will be able to consider your position more calmly, and to look affairs in the face."

Juliet Lavanne followed the advice of the new friend, who had been so strangely introduced to her, and doubtless passed a restless night.

In the morning Col. Mosher took her up on the hurricane roof, and there, secure from auditors, he made his revelation.

"In the first place," he said, "tell me something about yourself—how you have been living since your mother died, and what has been your view of your position."

"I was taken by my uncle Vaudrey after mother's death," replied Juliet, "and lived with him. He owns a large plantation in Louisiana, called Grosse Tete, and is said to be a very wealthy man. I was given to understand that I was a penniless orphan and entirely dependent upon him. He treated me well, but his wife, my aunt Alma, was very strict with me, and made me feel my dependence. My cousin Hector, a few years older than I, was a very bad boy, and delighted in taunting and tormenting me, and his mother encouraged him in doing so. When I was about ten years old I was sent to a boarding school at Mount Hope, Ohio, where I have been ever since. I have been fed and

clothed and educated, but my life has not been a pleasant one."

"It will surprise you to learn," said Mosher, "that you are the rightful owner of Grosse Tete, as your father's heiress. Your uncle Vaudrey is worth nothing, but has been enjoying the use of your property all these years, and is accountable to you for the profits he has derived from it. Having held the estate so long, he is naturally unwilling to give it up, and there are only two plans, it seems to me, by which he can hope to retain possession. One is to marry you to his son Hector."

"That is what the man told me," exclaimed Juliet.

"What man?"

"The man on the guards last night, the man you—"

"I understand. The man I dropped into the water. What did he have to say to you?"

"He seemed to know a great deal more about my affairs than I knew, and spoke to me with a familiarity that was quite impudent. Just before you came out he said that if I should prove to be a good girl when I went home, and should please my uncle and his family, my cousin Hector would make me his wife. I said that I disliked my cousin Hector, and would never marry him. Then he told me that I had said a very silly thing, as I was a penniless girl, and might be proud to make such a match. His manner was even more insulting than his words."

"Just as I thought," said Mosher. "That is Vaudrey Lavanne's first plan. If it should fail, as I presume it would, there would be nothing left for him to do but to put you out of the way."

"Put me out of the way? What do you mean? Do you suppose he would murder me?"

"I believe that he is base and desperate enough to murder you, if nothing short of murder would enable him to succeed in his designs, and that his wife is ambitious and cruel enough to act the part of Lady Macbeth. But there are more ways than one of putting people out of the way, of causing them to vanish and be forgotten. In short, I believe that Vaudrey Lavanne fully intends to hold on to your estate at all risks, and by whatever means he may consider necessary."

"You frighten me, sir. I see nothing but deep and bitter trouble before me. What can I do?"

"It will be necessary to play a deep game," replied Mosher. "Vaudrey Lavanne has so long had undisputed possession of your property, and has entrenched himself so strongly, that simple and legal means will not be sufficient to oust him. How long since you have seen him?"

"I have not seen him since he sent me to Ohio."

"Nor any of the family?"

"Nor any member of the family. He wrote to me, inclosing money, directing me to go to Louisville and take passage on a New Orleans steamboat, and I was to request the captain to land me at Grosse Tete."

"You must foil him with his own weapons," said Mosher. "It is a difficult game, but I believe you will be able to play it. Will you be guided by my advice?"

"I will obey my mother's instructions," replied Juliet, "and will trust you as she trusted you. What must I do?"

"You must disappear!"

CHAPTER III

"WHERE IS THE GIRL?"

THE extensive estate which was supposed to be the property of Vaudrey Lavanne bordered on the Mississippi, and his elegant residence faced the river. Neither about the house nor the plantation were there visible any signs of the ravages of war, or the difficulties of "reconstruction," or Southern shiftlessness, or straitened circumstances of any kind. All the indications were of abundant wealth, judiciously employed. The old slave quarters had given place to comfortable dwellings for "the hands," the tumble-down house had been rebuilt, and the grounds were tastefully laid out and kept in excellent order.

On the spacious eastern veranda, facing the river that shone like burnished gold under the rays of the declining sun, were seated Vaudrey Lavanne and his wife.

He was a large man, inclined to corpulence, with intensely black hair and eyes, dark features, and a heavy, stolid cast of countenance. His age was fifty, and he looked fully as old as he was. She was of medium stature and build, a brunette of a less pronounced type, with a countenance whose hard expression made it unattractive.

Their only son, Hector Lavanne, stood near them, leaning against one of the pillars of the veranda, and playing with a riding whip. He was a young man of twenty-four, who chose to appear in the character of a dandy hunter, to judge by his black velvet coat and vest, his white corduroy pantaloons, and his boots with shining tops that covered his legs up to the knees. He was much like his father in appear-

ance, except that he had a low brow, a coarse mouth and an expression that was usually either sullen or brutal.

Notwithstanding their elegant surroundings, these three persons did not appear at the moment to be particularly well pleased with themselves, with each other, or with the world in general.

"It is very strange," remarked Vaudrey Lavanne, "that that girl has not come."

"I suppose," said his wife, with a slight sneer, "that you, with your usual extreme delicacy, failed to give her positive orders."

"Indeed, I told her that she must come without delay; that she must go by rail to Louisville, and take the first boat that left for New Orleans."

"When should she have reached Grosse Tete, if she had obeyed your orders?"

"By this time, surely."

"Perhaps she is sick," suggested Hector.

"Or dead," added his father.

"No such luck as that," said Mrs. Lavanne.

"A watched pot never boils, and people who are wanted to die are the very ones that live forever. I firmly believe, Vaudrey, that you made a great mistake in sending for her. We should have left her up there in Ohio, trusting to time and the chapter of accidents to get her finally out of our way."

"Time and the chapter of accidents were just what I was afraid of," replied Mr. Lavanne. "She is growing older and wiser every day, and is continually liable to come in contact with somebody who may put new ideas in her head and persuade her to set up some kind of a claim. I prefer to have her under my eye, where I can watch her and shape her course to suit myself."

"You have taken a heavy contract," said Mrs. Lavanne. "A grown girl is not to be so easily controlled as you seem to suppose. The event will prove, I am afraid, that you have committed a great error, and I wish you to remember that I warned you against it."

"There is no danger that I will forget any of your warnings," sneered Lavanne.

"Oh, bother!" exclaimed Hector, who was evidently accustomed to such parental squabbles. "Can't you two quit cat-and-dogging each other? What are you going to do with the girl when you get her here? That is the point."

"We are going to marry her to you," gruffly replied his father.

"Suppose I won't marry her?"

"It is not a supposable case."

"Don't be too sure of that, sir. I used to hate the little sneak."

"As you are not quite a born idiot, Hector, I presume that you will marry her and make sure of keeping this property in the family. But we won't quarrel about that until the time comes, if it ever does come, when you set yourself against my will in such a vital matter. That will be a troublesome time for you, my lad."

"Just now the question is," remarked Mrs. Lavanne, "what has become of the girl?"

"There is somebody stopping at the gate," said Hector.

It was a covered buggy that was driven up the road, stopping in front of the Lavanne mansion, and it was agreed that "the girl" would not be likely to drive up in a buggy. In fact, it was a man who descended from that vehicle, and, after a few words with the driver, opened the gate, and came up the graveled avenue to the house.

"It is Ben Sharpless!" exclaimed Vaudrey Lavanne, "now we will get some news."

"And who is Ben Sharpless?" asked his wife.

"The detective whom I employed to shadow the girl, and to keep her in sight until she reached Grosse Tete."

"He is scarcely in sight of her now," muttered Mrs. Lavanne.

Sharpless, who was not a very attractive figure at his best, looked rather the worse for wear on this occasion, and his expression of anxiety did not adorn his countenance.

"Glad to see you, Sharpless," said Vaudrey Lavanne, rising to greet this welcome visitor.

"Where have you come from?"

"From the landing below here—I don't know its name—and I came in a deuce of a hurry, too."

"Better late than never. Where is the girl?"

"The girl?"

Sharpless was so stunned by this query, that he could utter only these two words, and he stood and stared vacantly at the three people on the veranda, until he recovered from the shock.

"The girl?" he repeated. "Isn't she here?"

"No," replied Lavanne. "She is not here, and we have seen nothing of her. We were wondering just now what can have become of her, as she should have been here three or four days ago."

Sharpless stepped up on the veranda and seated himself in a vacant chair.

"Excuse me," he said; "I am weak and out of sorts. I wish you would have that horse fed and watered, and give the driver something to eat. I may have to return to the landing very soon, or go somewhere else."

Vaudrey Lavanne gave the necessary orders, and begged Sharpless to explain himself.

"What is the matter?" he asked. "Of course you have lost sight of the girl."

"Lost sight of her?" replied Sharpless. "I should say that I had lost sight of her. But I supposed that she had come here all the same. Are you really not joking, or running a rig on me? Is it a positive fact that she is not here?"

Mr. Lavanne assured him that she was not at Grosse Tete, had not been there, and had not been seen by himself or any member of his family.

"I'm beat then," said Sharpless. "It was all the fault of that big, gentlemanly gambler, Moses Corson, otherwise known as Mississippi Mose."

Mr. Lavanne remarked that he knew that man. "If you know any good of him," said Sharpless, "it is more than I know. The girl was safely shipped on the Star of the West at Louisville. While the boat was in the Ohio, I was talking with her at night, on the ladies' cabin guards. She got a notion in her head that I had insulted her, and said so. Then this Mose Corson stepped up, and, after a few words, he quietly pitched me overboard."

"That was a right lively racket," said Hector, with a chuckle.

"It would have been a dead-alive-ly racket for me, if I hadn't been a good swimmer. The night was as dark as a stack of black cats, I was dropped off at the stern, and the boat was making good time down-stream. So there was nothing for me to do but to swim to the Indiana shore, and try to overtake the Star of the West by rail. But it was a long time before I could strike a railway station, and then I missed her at both Cairo and Memphis. From Memphis I came on to Grosse Tete as soon as I could."

"You have made a deuce of a botch of the business," remarked Vaudrey Lavanne; "but I cannot say that it was your fault. What do you suppose has become of the girl?"

"I'm clean beat, Mr. Lavanne, and own it. It is barely possible that she may have been taken down to New Orleans by mistake; but I am strongly inclined to suspect that there has been foul play, and that Mose Corson is concerned in it."

This suspicion did not strike Vaudrey Lavanne as having any foundation outside of the detective's prejudices.

"I know Corson well," said he, "and know him to be a very gentlemanly fellow, who associates with a good class of people, and plays a decent game. I know nothing against him, except that he plays cards for a living; but I have never heard him accused of cheating, or anything out of the way. He is a man who has always been noted for minding his own business, and there is no earthly reason why he should meddle in my affairs."

"Perhaps not," replied Sharpless; "but you can't always tell what sort of a game a man is playing."

Vaudrey Lavanne was clearly of the opinion that the girl had been carried on the way to New Orleans, or that her inexperience had caused her to be left at some landing below Grosse Tete. It was absolutely necessary that her whereabouts should be discovered as soon as possible, and it would be best for Sharpless to go at once to New Orleans, or to any point at which he might find the Star of the West, and make inquiries concerning her.

The detective made no delay in executing this order. He took supper with the family, was supplied with money by Mr. Lavanne, and was driven away from Grosse Tete, intending to proceed to New Orleans by the speediest route.

"There is one other thing, Vaudrey," said Mrs. Lavanne to her husband, when they were about to retire for the night. "The young woman whom you have engaged as a companion for Juliet will reach here to-morrow, according to the letter you have received."

"Yes, Alma, and I hope that you will treat her kindly. She is recommended to me by John Derickson of Vicksburg, a business man with whom I have dealt pretty largely, and in whose judgment I have entire confidence."

"Of course I will treat her well, Vaudrey; but I am convinced that this is another of your mistakes. I have advised you against it, and the time will come when you will remember my warning."

"Fiddlesticks! You are too suspicious to take any comfort, or to allow me to take any. I am tired of hearing you talk about my mistakes. Think how poor both of us were when you married me. And now we have been living in luxury for ten years, and expect to keep what we have. I don't seem to have made any mistakes yet."

"You are making mistakes now, Vaudrey, and you can never say that I have not warned you against them."

"I wish I could say that you had made an end of your continual croaking. The only question to be considered is, where is the girl?"

CHAPTER IV.

"WHAT A LIKENESS!"

VAUDREY LAVANNE'S motive in engaging a companion for "the girl," as he and his wife

were in the habit of styling Juliet, was a simple one, and might almost be styled a creditable one.

"The easiest way is the best," was one of his mottoes, and he believed that it would be much pleasanter and safer to persuade Juliet to marry Hector, than to attempt to accomplish that greatly desired end by any methods of compulsion. Therefore he had determined to treat his orphan niece kindly, to give her elegant surroundings, and to be by no means parsimonious in gratifying her tastes and humoring her wishes. At the same time he meant to impress upon her the fact of her dependence, and to give her to understand that she could retain her comforts and luxuries only by becoming the wife of his son. He was of the opinion that a natural longing for wealth and its advantages would be sufficient to win the consent of any average young lady, to say nothing of an orphan's gratitude to a kind and considerate uncle. He also believed that the repulsive manner of his wife, by which Juliet had been pretty sorely ground down when she was a girl, would work against his plans unless its influence should be counteracted by a lady companion, who would cheer her up and enable her to withstand the pressure of Mrs. Lavanne's hostility. Of course he meant that the lady companion should further his ends and help him to lead his niece in the course which he desired her to take.

As he was unable to leave his plantation, he wrote to John Derickson, a cotton factor of Vicksburg, with whom he had business relations, requesting him to find such a companion as was required, and send her to Grosse Tete.

John Derickson would have had considerable difficulty in filling this order, which was entirely out of his line of business, if he had not been unexpectedly aided.

He was seated in his office, and happened to be reading Vaudrey Lavanne's letter, for perhaps the twentieth time, when there entered a tall and fine looking gentleman, fashionably dressed, and of dignified appearance.

John Derickson jumped up, and greeted this visitor with enthusiasm.

"Why, Mose Corson! I am ever so glad to see you. Where did you drop from?"

Moses Corson differed considerably from him who had figured as Col. Mosher on the Star of the West; but the difference was caused by the absence of the black hair and beard which he had worn in that character. In his own brown hair, slightly tinged with gray, and with a closely shaven face, he was even an improvement upon the stately and popular Col. Mosher.

"I have come from going up and down upon the face of the earth," he said, as he seated himself, "like that dramatic person who opens the first act of the Book of Job. While I have been wandering, Derickson, I have attended to a little matter of business for you."

"I hope to goodness that it is that woman business. I was bothering about it just as you came in."

"That is exactly what it is. You wrote to me at Louisville, telling me that Vaudrey Lavanne wanted you to get him a young woman as a companion for his niece; that he wanted a Northern girl if possible, and that she must be a good musician, and must have a fair education. If you have not secured such a commodity—"

"I haven't, Corson, I had given it up. It was out of my line, and I was depending on you as a last resource."

"Then I have an article that will suit the market, and it is here."

"You should say she, not it. Who is the lady, and where does she come from?"

"Her name is Harriet Lessing, and she is from Ravenna, Ohio, which is far enough North, I hope to suit your friend. She is of a good family, as families go up there, has a good education, is a good musician, is good looking and good tempered, and that seems to be the sum of her good qualities. For the rest, she is an orphan, and is poor, and was glad of the chance to get a good home in the South."

The cotton factor leaned back in his chair, and smiled a smile of supreme satisfaction.

"You have taken quite a weight off my mind, Corson," he said. "I was anxious to please Lavanne, because he has been a good customer of mine, and I have no doubt that you have done the correct thing. Lavanne knows you, and I will tell him that I have secured this young lady on your recommendation."

"That is just what you must not do," replied Corson. "My name must not be mentioned in the matter."

A shade of suspicion crossed Derickson's face as he straightened himself up in his chair.

"What do you mean?" he asked. "I hope there is nothing crooked about this."

"I assure you, upon my word of honor, that there is not. It is one of the straightest acts of my life."

"But it is so strange that you refuse to allow me to use your name. It looks as if there might be some game on hand."

"When you speak of crookedness, my dear Derickson," remarked Corson, "you must remember that we are in the same boat in some

transactions, and that I have never played you false yet."

"Yes, I know that we are tied together, but I don't want to start any new schemes. Since I have become a capitalist, I have a wholesome dread of the law."

"The law shall never hurt you, John Derickson, while I am able to save you. I may fall some time, and when I do I will drop pretty hard; but I will not pull you down. This business is straight, I tell you, and there is not the slightest occasion for mentioning my name to Lavanne."

"Very well, Corson, I don't want to be drawn into any scrape, but your word is enough. I suppose I may see the young lady?"

"Certainly, I will take you to see her whenever you are ready."

The cotton factor was taken to the hotel at which Miss Lessing was stopping, and was highly pleased with her appearance and intelligence and manners. He wrote to Vaudrey Lavanne at once, apprising that gentleman of his acquisition, and soon thereafter Harriet Lessing was shipped to Grosse Tete.

When the Vicksburg packet rounded to at the Grosse Tete landing, about a mile from Vaudrey Lavanne's residence, that gentleman was there in a carriage, driven by his colored coachman, to welcome and do honor to the new member of the family.

He was justified in regarding Grosse Tete as a lonesome and unattractive place, notwithstanding its beauty, as he had no near neighbors, and the society of his wife and son was not specially pleasing to him. He was prepared, therefore, to consider an intelligent young lady from the North as a valuable addition to his household, provided that Mrs. Lavanne should not do her the honor to become jealous of her.

He had no difficulty in recognizing the young lady, as she was the only passenger who landed at Grosse Tete. A hasty glance showed him that her appearance was greatly in her favor, and he immediately introduced himself. Then he caused her trunk which was lettered with her full name, Harriet Lessing, to be placed in the carriage, and was driven away with her to the elegant mansion which was to become her home.

He found Miss Harriet Lessing to be a finely formed young lady, rather tall for her sex, with handsome, expressive features, and an unmistakable air of intelligence and refinement. Her abundant hair was of a golden brown, and she would have been a complete blonde, were it not for her large brown eyes, which dominated her face, lighting up now and then in a style that was highly fascinating. In a word, a beautiful young woman, whose intellectual charms fully equaled those of her person, and whose presence as he rode at her side Vaudrey Lavanne perceived to be eminently agreeable. He blessed John Derickson again and again for sending him such a prize.

Miss Lessing's reception at Grosse Tete was a chilling contrast to the warm welcome of her employer. The sight of her husband riding home with so handsome a young woman was naturally displeasing to Mrs. Lavanne, and as the elder lady had advised against the engagement of the younger lady, she found herself obliged to put such a coldness into her manner as should notify her husband that she had not abandoned her objections.

But this coldness had no visible effect upon Harriet Lessing, who was enthusiastic about the beauty of Grosse Tete and everything at and around it. She was so determined to please and be pleased, that she was particularly respectful and agreeable to Mrs. Lavanne, and her persistent good humor finally compelled that lady to melt quite sensibly.

The person who was most strangely affected by Miss Lessing's arrival was Hector Lavanne.

That young gentleman seldom had much to say in the presence of ladies, but was noted for his sullenness and stupidity, which his fond mother was wont to speak of as his shyness. Nor did he have much to say on this occasion; but no words were needed to give evidence of the interest excited in his breast by Miss Lessing. He actually blushed when he was introduced to her, and his eyes followed her wherever she went, noticing every movement she made. It must be admitted that his mouth was nearly as wide open as his eyes were.

When his father asked him privately what he thought of Miss Lessing, he spoke his opinion plainly enough.

"She's a stunner, and no mistake. If that girl Juliet was like her, you might talk."

As for "that girl Juliet," she was only once referred to in the presence of the new arrival, who was informed by Mr. Lavanne that his expected niece had not yet made her appearance.

"If she has not lost her way," he said, "she has been unaccountably delayed; but I have no doubt that she will soon be with us."

"I will be glad when she comes," replied Miss Lessing, "and I hope that she will prove to be as fond of me as I am sure to be of her."

"I understand that you come from Ohio," said Mr. Lavanne. "From what part of Ohio?"

"From a town called Ravenna."

"Do you know anything of Mount Hope?"

"I know that there is such a town, or village."

"There is an academy for young ladies at Mount Hope."

"So I have heard."

Further than this scrap of information Miss Lessing made no disclosures concerning her antecedents, and was not questioned in that direction. In the course of the evening, being requested to play and sing, she seated herself at the piano, and her performances were highly satisfactory to all present, even including Mrs. Lavanne. Hector was so enraptured that his eyes and mouth opened wider than ever, and he even made an awkward attempt at a compliment. He had never before appeared to take so much interest, even in a new horse or a particularly fine dog.

"What do you think of her?" Vaudrey Lavanne asked his better half that night at bedtime.

"It is my opinion," replied that lady, "as I presume it is yours, that she is a very handsome and intelligent young woman. Being pretty and poor, she is doubtless artful; but I hope that you will not soon have cause to repent of the mistake you have made in bringing her here."

"Nonsense!" was the only reply the master of Grosse Tete vouchsafed to this spiteful remark.

Harriet Lessing was shown to her room by Hannah, a middle-aged colored servant, who had been born a slave on the Lavanne estate. The broad and roomy house had only two stories, and this room was a sunny and pleasant one on the second floor. It was tastefully and brightly furnished, and presented a most comfortable and inviting appearance. On the wall opposite the door was an oil portrait of a beautiful young woman, richly dressed, and with a peculiarly sweet and gracious expression of countenance.

No sooner had Hannah set down the light which she carried, than she looked up at the portrait, and then stared at Harriet Lessing, her black face lighted up with a look of undisguised astonishment.

"What a likeness!" she exclaimed.

Miss Lessing, who had also noticed the portrait, blushed, and then turned pale.

"Do you mean to say that the portrait there is like me?" she asked.

"I nebber see'd sech a likeness," replied Hannah.

"Whose portrait is it?"

"Dat is de pictah ob Missis Lavanne—not the one down-stairs, but Geo'ge Lavanne's wife, who was killed in de wah!"

"How did she get killed in the war?"

"Not her, but her husban'. She died soon arter de wah ended. She was de muddah ob Miss Juliet, dat Mistah Lavanne is lookin' fur. I 'lowed dat Miss Juliet would grow up to look her muddah, 'ceptin' dat she's got dark ha'r; but I reckon you looks most like de pictah dan Miss Juliet 'ud ebber look. Missis was gwine to gib dis room to Miss Juliet; but she 'lowed dat her muddah's pictah might worry her and tole me to fix it up fur you."

Miss Lessing did not seem to take a lively interest in the portrait of the dead Mrs. Lavanne, and soon dismissed Hannah; but when she knelt down to say her prayers she knelt before the portrait, instead of kneeling at the side of her bed, and her eyes were wet with tears as she prayed.

CHAPTER V.

AN ALLY FOR BEN SHARPLESS.

DETECTIVE BEN SHARPLESS went direct from Grosse Tete to New Orleans, reaching that city in time to catch the steamer Star of the West, which had discharged her cargo, had taken on a load of freight and passengers for the upper country, and was about to start on her return to Louisville. Sharpless hastened on board and questioned Captain Grace concerning the young lady who was registered on the down trip as Juliet Lavanne.

Captain Grace remembered that young lady well, and the clerk remembered her. She had left the boat at Memphis. He noticed her when she went ashore and supposed that she was only going to look at the city, but afterward discovered that her trunk had been taken ashore at Memphis. He thought that this was a strange proceeding on her part, as her passage was paid to Grosse Tete.

Sharpless asked the captain if he remembered Colonel Mosher, who was a passenger on the same trip.

Of course Captain Grace remembered Colonel Mosher, who was a very popular man, and made many friends. He also left the boat at Memphis.

Did he go ashore with the young lady?

No; the young lady went ashore alone, and Captain Grace thought that she took a carriage, but was not certain. A number of passengers got off at Memphis, and Colonel Mosher went ashore with a knot of them, talking and laughing. He did not seem to interest himself in the young lady at that time.

Had he seemed to take an interest in her at any other time?

Scarcely, and Captain Grace would not have

supposed that they were acquainted, if he had not seen them, once, conversing on the hurricane deck.

Captain Grace then wished to know why he was questioned so closely, and Sharpless informed him that the young lady had been bound for Grosse Tete, where she was expected by her friends; that she had not reached Grosse Tete when she was due there, and it was feared that she had gone astray, or had been inveigled ashore for some evil purpose. He also told as much as it pleased him to tell of his adventure on the upper guards, which had caused him to leave the Star of the West so suddenly.

"It is a strange affair all around," said the captain, "and I would be sorry to have the name of my boat brought up in connection with it; but it ought to be looked into, and you shall have all the assistance I can give you."

Sharpless recovered his valise, which had been left in charge of the porter, and took passage on the Star of the West to Memphis.

At Memphis he went the rounds of the haunts of the so-called sporting men, who might be supposed to be acquainted with such a noted character as Mississippi Mose, and made diligent inquiry concerning that person, but did not succeed in finding anybody who had seen him in Memphis for a long time. Indeed, most of them were ready to swear that he had not been in the city, as they would surely have seen and known him if he had visited Memphis.

The detective then carefully examined the registers of all the hotels, high and low, but found no record of the arrival of either Colonel Mosher or Juliet Lavanne.

"I am certain he has been here lately," was the man-hunter's mental conclusion, "and he must be playing some very deep game, or he would not cover his tracks so carefully."

Acting on this conviction, and believing that Moses Corson, during his stay in Memphis, had retained his character of Colonel Mosher, Sharpless made inquiries concerning that noticeable person, of whom he gave an accurate description.

At last, after running down a few false trails, he found a gentleman a resident of Memphis, who had been a passenger with Colonel Mosher on the Star of the West, and who remembered him well. This gentleman had met the colonel a day or two after the Star of the West landed at Memphis, as he was walking down the levee, carrying a valise, to take a Southern-bound boat, and had been told by him that he was going to New Orleans. He was sure that Colonel Mosher had gone South on that boat, and that there was no lady with him.

The detective was convinced that Juliet Lavanne had left Memphis in the company of Moses Corson, although he could give no good reason for his conviction, and was obliged to admit that he did not know what possible motive Corson could have had for inveigling her away.

"I will hunt Mississippi Mose," he said. "When I find him, if I don't find Miss Lavanne I will at least find the man who is responsible for her disappearance."

It was night when he reached this conclusion, and he was passing a liquor and billiard saloon, when his attention was attracted by the voice of a quarrel and a scuffle within.

It was his nature, strengthened by practice, to "take in" such occurrences when they came in his way, and he stepped into the saloon.

As he did so, he heard a chorus of angry exclamations, such as "Cheat!" "Liar!" "Yankee interloper!" and saw a young man backed up in a corner near a pool table, brandishing a cue, and facing four or five others, who were threatening him with all sorts of personal damage.

Sharpless, who had a remarkably good memory of faces, thought that he recognized the young man, and hastened to his side.

"You are a nice crowd," he said, "to pile on one man. Is this your notion of fair play? You ought to be ashamed of yourselves."

The assailants, perceiving that the reinforcement amounted only to one short man, who seemed to be better able to talk than to fight, pressed forward to make their threats good. But Sharpless, who was of tougher timber than his appearance would indicate, met the foremost with such well delivered blows, straight from the shoulder, that they fell back to consider the matter. By this time others were ready to interfere, and the quarrel came to a sudden close.

The young man who had stood at bay accepted the arm of his friend in need, and walked with him out into the street.

"I thought that I recognized you," said Sharpless, interrupting the young man's expression of thanks, "and now I am sure of it. Are you not Walter Preston, of Mount Hope, Ohio?"

"You have struck it; but I don't remember meeting you anywhere. Who are you?"

"Come to my room, and we will have a talk. I believe that I can tell you something about a matter that interests you deeply."

Walter Preston accompanied the detective to his hotel, where the latter ordered a bottle of wine and some cigars. When these had been

duly sampled, he proceeded to make himself known.

"I am a detective officer," he said, "connected with a private detective agency, and occasionally employed on Government service."

"I hope," suggested Preston, "that you did not protect me from those fellows for the purpose of putting me under arrest."

"Nothing of the kind. I was acquainted with a young lady at the Mount Hope Academy, in whom I fancied that you took an interest."

"Not Miss Lavanne?" eagerly asked Preston. "Miss Juliet Lavanne. Had I guessed right?"

"Well, Mr.—"

"Sharpless is my name—Benjamin Sharpless."

"I have no objection to admitting, Mr. Sharpless, that I am interested in Miss Lavanne, that I admire her; in fact, that I love her."

"And she returns your love?"

"That is a delicate subject, Mr. Sharpless."

"You may safely confide in me," urged the detective. "I will keep your secret, if you wish it to remain a secret, and you will soon perceive that your interests run in the same track with mine."

"It is not really a secret, and I am free to say that Miss Lavanne and I are engaged, and that we intend to marry as soon as circumstances will permit."

Looking at Walter Preston, the detective needed no confirmation of this statement, as he was sure that Preston was just such a young man as Juliet Lavanne would be likely to fancy—perhaps twenty-two or twenty-three years old, but tall for his age, well formed, of fine features, and with a frank and engaging expression of countenance. But how had such a young man become involved in a bar-room quarrel, and why had such opprobrious epithets been flung at him.

On this point he questioned Preston, and was answered freely and plainly.

Preston explained that as time had hung heavily on his hands, having no acquaintances in the city, he had strolled into a billiard saloon, and had accepted an invitation to play pool with some strangers. A little money was put up on the games, and he lost at first, but "got his hand in" at the third game. The stakes were then heavier, and he was on the point of winning, when all his antagonists turned against him, with the intention of driving him away and saving their money.

"So you intend to marry Miss Lavanne as soon as circumstances will permit," resumed Sharpless. "I am sorry to inform you that circumstances are dead against you just now!"

"How so?" asked the young man.

"She is the orphan niece of a wealthy planter in Louisiana."

"So I have been told."

"He lately wrote to her, directing her to take a New Orleans boat at Louisville, and come home at once. At the same time he requested me to take passage on the boat and watch over her, as she is young and inexperienced. I was to see her safe to her home at Grosse Tete. But I left the boat suddenly, under circumstances which I will explain hereafter, and she has never reached Grosse Tete."

"She has not gone home?" exclaimed Walter Preston, starting from his chair in his excitement.

"Sit down, Mr. Preston, and be as calm as you can be. This is a matter that must be discussed coolly. Miss Lavanne has not reached her home, and none of her relatives have seen her. She is missing. She has mysteriously disappeared."

"This is terrible, Mr. Sharpless. What do you suppose has become of her?"

"That is what I am about to explain to you. I have reason to believe that a gambler named Moses Corson, otherwise known as Mississippi Mose, is responsible for her disappearance."

Sharpless proceeded to tell the young man of his encounter with Corson on the Star of the West, coloring it to suit himself. He then related the particulars of his visit to Grosse Tete, his discovery of the non-arrival of Juliet Lavanne, and his subsequent search at New Orleans and Memphis.

"I am convinced," he said, "that she left the boat here at the instigation of that man Corson, and that she has gone down the river with him."

"It is not possible," protested Walter Preston, who was fearfully excited by these disclosures. "A sweeter, purer, more modest girl never lived, and I am sure that she is true to me. It is not possible that she would be so forgetful of her friends, and so false to herself and to me, as to go off in such a haphazard way with a strange man."

"I make no insinuation against the young lady," replied Sharpless. "I see no cause to accuse her, and do not doubt that she is as good as gold. But the fact remains that she has disappeared, and I can't help connecting that man Corson with her unaccountable disappearance. I can't imagine what sort of an influence he has exerted upon her, or what his purpose has been in persuading her to leave her home and her

relatives. It is all unaccountable, and I would believe it to be impossible, if I could shut my eyes to the facts; but I have no doubt that he caused her to leave the Star of the West, and that she has gone South with him."

"What is to be done?" inquired the young man. "I presume that you mean to continue the search?"

"Yes, and I want your help, if you are willing to join me."

"Join you?" exclaimed Preston. "I will jump at the chance. I will go to the end of the world with you if necessary, and will dare any danger in such a cause. It will be a dark day for that man when he crosses my path!"

"You are just the man for the work," said the detective. "You will put your whole heart into it, and I am sure that you have plenty of brain and nerve. Together we will hunt Mose Corson down, and when we get him in our clutches we will not show him one grain of mercy!"

CHAPTER VI. A VILE SCHEME.

It was a cruel and detestable scheme which circumstances, reaching back through a series of years, had enabled Sharpless to devise and put in execution against Moses Corson.

For the instrument which he intended to employ, to effect the destruction of Corson, was Corson's own son, and Sharpless knew it.

Walter Preston looked upon him with some suspicion after the outburst in which he relieved his mind of his feeling toward Corson. It was so different from his usual style, that it seemed to reveal the real nature of the man, and to have a story behind it.

"You speak very strongly," said Preston. "One would suppose that you may have some personal grudge against that man."

"I have," replied Sharpless. "I don't love him, and have good cause to hate him with a deadly hatred. Mr. Preston, I have been in the penitentiary."

"Ah!" exclaimed the young man, again becoming doubtful of his ally.

"I have been an inmate of the Ohio penitentiary for three years. But it was not for any intentional crime, nor through any fault of my own. Moses Corson sent me there. He is not only a gambler, but one of the shrewdest, most skillful and most successful counterfeiters in the country; but it has been impossible to secure evidence that would convict him. I believe that he is connected with a number of reputable business men in various cities, who assist him in his operations, and the cloak of respectability is over them all."

"But how did he put you in prison?" asked Preston.

"It happened a long time ago, when I was considerably younger than I am now. I had come to the city from my country home, with little money and less wit, to seek my fortune. Finding no fortune, I set at work to lose the little I had, through drink and gambling. Thus I fell in with Mose Corson, and he condescended to play cards with me. He could handle me as he pleased, but I had not sense enough to know that. After he had fooled with me for a while, one night he won all the money I had left, and then allowed me to win back a small amount, which he paid me, not in the money he had got from me, but from a roll of ten-dollar bills."

"Those three ten-dollar bills were all I had, and the next day I offered one of them in payment of a small purchase. It proved to be counterfeit. I was arrested, and two more counterfeit bills were found on me. I said that I had got them from Moses Corson, and was laughed at. He had left town; and it was years before I saw him again. He suffered me to be sent up because he knew that the testimony of a convict could not be used against him."

"I was tried, convicted, and sentenced to State's prison for a term of five years. When I came out I vowed that I would have revenge upon that man if it took all my lifetime. Now you may judge whether I have cause to hate Moses Corson."

"It was a shameful thing," said Preston, "and your grudge is natural enough; but I do not know that it is any more bitter than mine will be, if it can be proved that he decoyed away Juliet Lavanne."

"Had you made arrangements to correspond with her?" asked Sharpless.

"Partially so. She knew that I was coming to Memphis, and I had hoped to receive a letter from her here, but none has come yet."

"Do your parents know of your engagement?"

"My parents? I have none."

"What! another orphan?"

"An orphan with no relatives of any kind," replied the young man. "There seems to be a sort of mystery connected with me, though I suppose that it would prove to be nothing very mysterious if the truth were known. I lost my parents when I was quite young. I remember my father as a tall and fine-looking man; but I saw little of him, as he was seldom at home. My mother was a pale and delicate woman, who faded away and died while I was a little fellow. Then I was sent to a boarding-school, and I never saw my father again. It was not

long before I learned that he had died abroad. From the boarding-school I went to an academy, then to college, and then entered the office of a lawyer in Mount Hope, with whom I studied, and lately I was admitted to the bar."

"Who has been paying the expense of all this?" asked Sharpless.

"A lawyer in Louisville named Whitley. Since I came of age I have received from him a regular income, large enough to enable me to live without work, and have been told that it is paid from my father's estate, in accordance with his will. I suppose there is really nothing strange about this, but it has always had a queer look to me."

Benjamin Sharpless could have explained to the young man pretty fully the actual condition of his affairs; but it did not suit his purpose to do so.

He had not been on the trail of Moses Corson so long and with such a vindictive purpose, without learning some facts which Corson had sought to conceal from the world, and the points which he had not proved his shrewdness had enabled him to conjecture with tolerable accuracy.

He had discovered that Corson had been a married man, and that he had a son. It was reasonable to suppose that a man of his character, one of the higher class of gamblers, ambitious and possessed of a certain standing among respectable people, should wish his son to be brought up in ignorance of his father's occupation, and to enjoy the proceeds of that occupation without being subjected to reflections upon the manner in which his money had been procured.

With this reasoning for a basis, Sharpless set himself at work to discover the son of the man he hated, and some of the shrewdest and closest detective work of his life was done in that pursuit. At last he succeeded in locating him at a college in Kenton, Ohio, and thereafter he kept himself informed of the boy's character and movements and employments.

The detective could not help admiring the spirit of self-sacrifice that had induced Moses Corson to become dead to his only child for the sake of that child's future; but this involuntary admiration did not prevent him from seeing in the separation of father and son an opportunity for the gratification of his revenge, or from watching his chance to strike at the father through the son.

He had never supposed that such a splendid chance would come in his way as was unexpectedly afforded him by his meeting with Walter Preston at Memphis.

Among his discoveries he had ascertained that Corson's son was known by his mother's name of Preston, instead of his father's name, and that he believed himself to be an orphan. Such particulars as his research and conjecture had not already supplied were given to him in young Preston's account of himself.

None of these facts did he disclose to his young ally, as he hoped to work out his revenge by setting the son against the father, and it was of course necessary that Preston should remain in ignorance of his parentage.

"It does seem rather queer," he said, when he had listened to the young man's story; "but it is not really unusual, and I see no cause to suspect a mystery. You are an orphan, as many others are, and your parents may have been foreigners, or have been alone in the world, or have quarreled with their relatives. You had better put such thoughts out of your head, make the best of what comes to you in the world, and do what your hand finds to do without looking behind or before."

"And the thing to do just now," said the young man, "is to find that man Corson, and through him to discover what has become of Juliet Lavanne."

"That is the point, my lad. If we do not find her with him, he will know where she is, and must be forced to tell."

"I can't help asking myself all the time, Mr. Sharpless, what possible object he can have had in decoying her away, and how she can have been induced to go with him."

"That is what we must discover, and the first thing necessary is to find Corson. He is a well-known man, but he may be a thousand miles from us at this moment, or only a block away. I am convinced that he has a secret retreat, if not more than one, where he carries on his counterfeiting operations, and it would be worth more than money to me to light on him at such a place, and catch him in the act."

"I am impatient to start," said Preston.

"What direction shall we take?"

"We will first go to Vicksburg, and you will remain there while I run over to Grosse Tete and report to Mr. Lavanne. It is of course possible that the young lady has returned home, though I have not the least hope of that."

"Then will we search for Corson until we find him?"

"Yes; but I warn you that you may find it a dangerous business. He is a desperate man if he is run into a corner, and a very powerful one. He picked me up and dropped me overboard as if I had been a baby, and it isn't every man who can handle me, as you know."

"The danger does not trouble me," replied Preston.

"But you must be well armed. As I am probably a better judge of weapons than you are, I will get a pistol for you, and we will take the first train south in the morning."

Sharpless chuckled when the young man had left his room.

"That fellow will be like a bloodhound on Corson's trail," he said. "I will only have to turn him loose, and he will take as much of the job off my hands as he can. I declare this is almost too good to be true. Oh, Mose Corson, it was a dark day for you and yours when you played your foul game on Ben Sharpless!"

CHAPTER VII.

THE MYSTERY STILL UNEXPLAINED.

It could not be denied that Miss Harriet Lessing soon became a great favorite at Grosse Tete with everybody except Mrs. Lavanne. But it must be said that that lady favored nobody but her son Hector, and that she was not a prime favorite even with him.

Everybody endeavored to make Miss Lessing's residence at Grosse Tete agreeable to her, with the exception of the mistress of the house, who insisted on being read to as she lay in bed or lounged on a sofa. Other than this occupation, which was not particularly irksome, she had no apparent employment, and Vaudrey Lavanne and his son vied with each other in their efforts to make her leisure time pass pleasantly.

While Vaudrey Lavanne made the most of Miss Lessing, it could not be doubted that Hector was her most ardent admirer. That young gentleman, who had previously absented himself from home as much as he conveniently could, amusing himself with his dogs and his gun and a few young men of his own calibre, abandoned his usual occupations, and devoted himself to the task of cultivating the acquaintance of Harriet Lessing.

This was a rather tedious process, as he had little to say, and at first he contented himself with keeping his eyes on her, at the same time keeping his mouth open as if he would like to swallow her. By gradual advances he began to walk and talk with her, and it was evident that this intercourse had a humanizing effect upon him.

He soon became intensely jealous of her, and when he was compelled to show her to Frank Searcy, one of his young friends, he watched her with a frown on his face, although Frank was an ill-favored young fellow, who had hardly a word to say for himself.

When the interview was ended he took Searcy aside, and made a confidential communication to him.

"Ain't she a stunner, Frank?" he asked.

Frank "allowed" that the epithet fitted Miss Lessing exactly.

"I am going to marry her," added Hector.

"The deuce you are! Suppose she won't let you?"

"Won't let me? Ha, ha! That is a good one. As if she wouldn't jump at the chance."

"You told me that your gov'nor meant that you should marry your cousin."

"That is his notion, not mine. Besides my cousin has turned up missing."

"But the girl is as poor as Job's turkey."

"So is my cousin. She hasn't got a cent but what we give her."

The cousin who had "turned up missing" was naturally an object of interest to the imported companion, who made inquiries concerning her of Vaudrey Lavanne, but got little satisfaction from him.

He at first said that Juliet's journey had been delayed by sickness. Then he was of the opinion that she had stopped on the way to visit some friends. Finally he admitted that there was something singular about her continued absence, but presumed that she would soon put in an appearance.

Hector Lavanne spoke more plainly, and was willing enough to tell all he knew when she questioned him concerning Juliet.

"I don't know what has become of her," he said, "and, between you and me, I don't much care. I haven't seen her since I was a little chap, and then I used to hate her because she was such a sneaking, whimpering, puny little thing. You are worth a dozen of her, Miss Lessing."

This was the first real compliment that had been able to get beyond his lips, and his face turned red as he blurted it out.

"None of us could get along with her," continued Hector, "but she was on our hands, you know, and we had to support her and put up with her."

"Has she no property of her own?" asked Miss Lessing.

"Not a cent," replied the heir apparent of Grosse Tete. "I don't see how she manages to get along while she is wandering about—if she is wandering about, and not at the bottom of the river, where she ought to be. I don't believe that the gov'nor sent her more than money enough to bring her here, and she couldn't make much of a splurge on that."

"Can none of you guess what has become of her?"

"Oh, there's plenty of guessing, but I reckon it don't amount to much. The gov'nor hired a fellow to come down on the boat with her and watch her; but he turned up with a queer story about getting pitched overboard and losing sight of the girl. He tried to make us believe that she had gone off with the man who ducked him, a gambler named Corson; but we know Corson, and he is old enough to be her father. It is just as likely that she may have gone off with the other chap, though he don't look like the kind that a girl would be apt to take to. She must have gone off with some man, or how would she get along?"

"Perhaps she has lost her way," suggested Miss Lessing.

"If she had, she would have found it by this time. No, it is a clear case of running away, and I am glad, for my part, that she is gone. Why, Miss Lessing, the gov'nor was dead set on my marrying that girl, while I wouldn't turn on my heel to look at her, and I hate her more than ever, since you have come."

At this stage the conversation ceased to be interesting to Miss Lessing, and she managed to end it.

She had been at Grosse Tete about a week, when there was an unexpected arrival.

Greatly to the surprise of Mrs. Lavanne, and equally to the delight of her husband, Moses Corson visited Grosse Tete, as if to clear himself of the imputations that had been cast upon him.

He was not only an acquaintance of Vaudrey Lavanne's, but was a prime favorite with that gentleman, who had the instincts of a gambler, and was always pining for an opportunity to indulge his propensities. Lavanne was wont to say that Corson played "a square, gentlemanly game," and that he would rather have a bout with him than any man living.

Therefore the master of Grosse Tete captured this guest immediately upon his arrival, in spite of the frowns and insinuations of Mrs. Lavanne, from which Corson was doubtless glad to escape, and ran him off into his library, which was securely closed against all intruders, while the two men sat down to Lavanne's favorite game of "seven-up."

This absorbing occupation did not admit of any other conversation than such as pertained to the cards, and it was kept up until a late hour of the night. When it was finally brought to a close, Vaudrey Lavanne was the winner by a small amount, and this put him in an excellent humor. Over the wine and cigars his feeling toward Corson grew warmer.

"I feel quite proud of my success to-night," he said. "It is not often that I get a chance to beat a professional."

"I can hardly call myself a professional now," replied Corson. "Though I play a great deal, my play is a pastime, rather than an occupation. But I must say that there is no amateur I know of who plays a stronger game of seven-up than you do."

"You shall have your revenge to-morrow, Corson; but you will find me pretty hard to handle. By the way, there has been a pretty serious accusation brought against you lately, and I must inquire into it. Have you run off with my niece?"

"Run off with your niece? That is a new style of joke. Would you take me to be a man who is likely to run off with a young lady? Really, now, Lavanne, have you a niece?"

"Indeed I have, though it is a blessing I could well spare, and she was due here as much as ten days ago; but she has mysteriously disappeared."

"How do I happen to be connected with her disappearance?" asked Corson.

"Do you know a man named Ben Sharpless?"

"Can't say that I do. At least, I don't remember the name. Who is he?"

"He says that you threw him overboard, from the Star of the West, at night, between Louisville and Cairo."

"Is that the fellow? I remember him and the well deserved ducking he got. He annoyed me in the Social Hall that night with impertinent questions. Afterward I happened to step out on the ladies' cabin guards, and saw him talking to a young lady who complained that he had insulted her. I told him to make himself scarce, and he set on me for a scuffle. Then I got angry, and—yes, Lavanne, I chucked him overboard."

"The young lady was my niece," said Lavanne.

"Indeed! She impressed me as an interesting girl, though I am not at all partial to brunettes. I noticed her dark hair and eyes and her pleasing face as I led her into the cabin."

"Did you see her after that?" asked Lavanne.

"I may have seen her at the table or elsewhere, but took no special notice of her. As I have said, brunettes are not to my taste. Is it the man I put into the river who accuses me of having run off with her?"

"That is what he wanted to make us believe. He is a detective whom I had employed to look after the girl during her journey to Grosse Tete."

"A detective? Better not have anything to do with such cattle, Lavanne. The chances

always are that you will get your fingers burnt. I suppose he brought my name into the matter because he had a grudge against me on account of the ducking I gave him."

"That's just what I told my wife," said Lavanne, "and I told him that you were not at all the kind of a man who would run off with a young lady. His story was all stuff and nonsense, I knew, but it was only right to tell you about it."

"Perhaps he carried her off, himself," suggested Corson.

"By Jove! that might have been the way of it, though I don't know why he should do so."

"Or why I should do so. Was there any property coming to her?"

"Not a cent."

"No accounting for it in that way? It is very strange. And all you know about it is that she has not arrived? Let me see. I don't remember noticing the young lady again, and on that trip I left the boat at Memphis. Perhaps she was carried down to New Orleans by mistake, and there is no guessing what has happened to her since. It is my opinion, Lavanne, that you had better drop your detective, or hire another one to watch him. I will be going direct to New Orleans from here, and I will look after the young lady. Are you very anxious about her?"

"Scarcely what you can call anxious," replied Lavanne; "but I would like to know what has become of her—whether she is alive or not."

In further conversation the next day Moses Corson confirmed the impression he had made upon Vaudrey Lavanne, and even convinced that gentleman's wife that he was the last person in the world who could be suspected of having had anything to do with the disappearance of Juliet.

When he was introduced to Harriet Lessing, he started back with an expression of surprise.

"I must ask Miss Lessing's pardon," he said, "but there is an astonishing resemblance between her and the young lady I met on the Star of the West. The features are much the same, and the eyes appear to be similar; but Miss Lessing is a decided blonde, while your niece was as decided a brunette."

"I am glad to hear of the resemblance," said Harriet Lessing, "as Mr. Hector Lavanne has been complimenting me at the expense of his cousin."

"Miss Lessing bears a striking likeness to the portrait of Juliet's mother," remarked Mrs. Lavanne. "Several of us have noticed it. But I had not supposed that there could be much resemblance between her and my niece, who was an ugly little thing when I saw her last, with dark hair which has doubtless turned completely black by this time."

CHAPTER VIII.

REVELATIONS AND COMPLICATIONS.

It was settled at Grosse Tete, the morning after Moses Corson's arrival, that the insinuations of Sharpless against that gentleman were entirely without foundation. As Vaudrey Lavanne said, Corson was not at all the sort of man who would meddle with other people's business.

He would have changed his opinion if he had seen his guest, a few hours later, walking with the imported companion, and had listened to their conversation.

Miss Lessing went for a walk in the afternoon, and fell in with Moses Corson at a distance from the Lavanne residence. "They met by chance, the usual way," but greeted each other like old friends.

"How long is this to last?" earnestly inquired the young lady.

"I really can't say," replied Corson. "How are you getting on?"

"I am enduring it, but it is hard, and I am continually in fear of being found out."

"No danger of that, I believe; at least, not at present. If you should be found out, as in time you may be, you would be no worse off than if you had come here direct in your own character. You have at least been saved the annoyance of having Hector Lavanne forced upon you."

"But he means to force himself upon me," protested Miss Lessing. "I believe that the young brute has fallen in love with me, and he is getting to be unpleasantly attentive."

"I am not at all surprised at that. But I am sure that you have tact and strength of will enough to make him know his place, if he should carry his attentions too far, and in that you could rely upon being aided by his parents. You must submit to such annoyances, for the sake of the end that is to be gained. Have you discovered anything yet?"

"I have seen and heard enough to convince me that every thing you tell me is true; that I am in my uncle Vaudrey's way, and that it is his purpose to get me out of it by marrying me to Hector. But why must I stay here and play the spy? If my right to this property is clear, why can I not go away from here and rely upon the law to give me possession of what belongs to me?"

"Simply because your right is not clear,"

replied Corson. "Your father, George Lavanne, was one of the good-hearted, easy-going sort—as brave as a lion, but as simple as a child. When the war broke out, he entered the army, because his friends and neighbors did so, and because it seemed to him to be the right thing to do. His brother, Vaudrey, stayed at home and devoted his energies to taking care of himself and keeping out of trouble. After the capture of New Orleans George Lavanne was persuaded that there was danger of the confiscation of his property by the Federal authorities, and he transferred it all to Vaudrey, who had kept himself clear of entanglements. Shortly after that transfer he was killed at the head of his regiment, and since then the title to Grosse Tete and all its belongings has been in Vaudrey Lavanne."

"Is there no hope, then?" asked the young lady, with a sigh.

"Plenty of hope. Your father was wise enough to cause his brother to execute a declaration of trust, in which the real nature of the transfer was explained. It was to be kept a secret, and not produced until the supposed danger of confiscation was over."

"What has become of it, then?"

"If we knew that, there would be no more trouble. I only know that there was such an instrument, because I have been so informed by a man who signed it as a witness, and who is still living. Where is it? Ah! that's the question. Your uncle Vaudrey believes that it is in existence, or he would not be so anxious to marry you to his son. Without that instrument I believe that the facts could be so brought out that the courts would give you the estate; but there would be a long and costly lawsuit, and your uncle has possession, which is a good deal in his favor."

"There seems to be very little in my favor just now," remarked Miss Lessing.

"There are many things in your favor. To begin with, there is yourself, and there is myself, and neither of us is to be sneezed at. Don't be downhearted, my dear child. Keep a stiff upper lip, if you will allow me that bit of slang, and believe strongly in luck and pluck, and cast care to the winds."

"But I cannot cast care to the winds. It is not only hard to be here as I am, but I am false to myself, and false to—another."

"Another?" exclaimed Corson. "Then there must be a young man in the case. Who is he?"

Miss Lessing blushed, but answered this plain question plainly.

"There is a young man in the case, and I am not ashamed to admit it. He is a young lawyer of Mount Hope, and his name is Walter Preston."

Moses Corson's face blanched instantly, and he shivered as if with an ague fit.

"What is the matter?" she asked. "Have I shocked you?"

"Nothing of the sort," he replied, after a moment's hesitation. "I am troubled with neuralgia, and it gave me a terrible twinge just now; but it soon goes over. Are you very fond of that young gentleman?"

"We are very fond of each other, sir—so fond that we are engaged to be married. We are both orphans, and had to ask nobody's consent."

"Both orphans," repeated Corson, musingly. "Both orphans. How strangely people are sometimes brought together in this big world! If it were written in a book, nobody would believe it."

"I see nothing strange about it," she said. "But I do see a great deal of trouble. I promised to write to him, but I am afraid to write from here, as affairs have now turned out. What will he think of me? What shall I do?"

"That is one matter," said Corson, "in which it would be hard for me to advise you just now. If he knows you as I know you, he will be sure that you are as good as gold and as true as steel, whatever may happen. For the present I can only ask you to wait, to have patience a little longer."

The two returned to the house together, and Hector Lavanne glowered at them as he saw them approaching, but that scared nobody.

In speaking to Vaudrey Lavanne and his wife, Corson was loud in his praise of Miss Lessing, whose acquaintance, as he said, he had so happily formed that afternoon.

"If your niece," he said, "possessed the beauty and intelligence and sprightliness of Miss Lessing, you might well be proud of her; but there is a great difference between the two, though at first glance there is such a striking similarity. From the little I saw of Juliet Lavanne, I judged her to be a person who would seem quite plain and commonplace by the side of Miss Lessing."

Mrs. Lavanne, though by no means partial to the imported companion, was pleased with comparisons which were so unfavorable to Juliet, and her husband was clearly of the opinion that his niece "couldn't hold a candle" to Harriet Lessing.

In spite of the entreaties of Vaudrey Lavanne who had not had enough of "seven-up," Moses Corson was obliged to tear himself away from

Grosse Tete, and at his departure he promised to search for Juliet.

"You will understand," said Vaudrey, as he left his guest at the landing, "that I am not as particular about the girl as I was before she cut this caper; but I would like to know what has become of her."

The day after the departure of Moses Corson, Mr. Benjamin Sharpless arrived at Grosse Tete.

That individual was ready to plume himself upon the discoveries he had made on the Star of the West and at Memphis, and was stronger than ever in his conviction that "Mississippi Mose" was responsible for the disappearance of Juliet Lavanne. But he met with a chilling reception from the master of Grosse Tete.

"Haven't you got rid of that absurd idea yet?" asked Vaudrey Lavanne. "Why, my friend Corson has been here for nearly two days, and I assure you that he is far above suspicion. Nothing could be more open than his manner in speaking of the affair, and nothing could be clearer than his statements."

Sharpless met this confident assurance with the equally confident statement that Corson, and nobody else, knew what had become of Juliet Lavanne, adding that he had discovered that she did not proceed to New Orleans on the Star of the West, but had left the boat at Memphis with Corson, and from Memphis had gone down the river with him.

This information staggered Lavanne for a moment; but he questioned its accuracy as soon as he began to cross-examine the detective.

"That she did not go to New Orleans seems to be certain," he said; "but are you sure that she left the boat with Corson?"

"I don't mean to say that they went ashore arm in arm," replied Sharpless, "or that they crossed the gang plank together; but they both left the boat at Memphis."

"And that is all you know about it. Mr. Corson told me that he left the Star of the West at Memphis, going ashore with a party of friends, and that he saw nothing of the girl. The mere fact that she went ashore at Memphis does not connect him in the least with her disappearance. Did you learn anything at Memphis to prove that they were together there?"

Sharpless was compelled to admit that his inquiries in that direction had been unavailing.

"What evidence have you to show that they went down the river together?"

Sharpless admitted that he had only discovered that Corson went down the river, and that he presumed that Miss Lavanne accompanied him.

"Just as I thought!" triumphantly exclaimed Vaudrey Lavanne. "Nothing but a matter of inference, after all. It is wonderful how a detective, when he gets what he calls a theory in his head, is bound to stick to it, in spite of the facts, and will do his best to shape the facts to fit it. It is clear that you have a grudge against my friend Corson, and that you have allowed that grudge to get the better of your judgment."

"If Corson has not carried off Miss Lavanne," asked Sharpless, "who has done it?"

"That is another question. I should say that you are quite as likely to have carried her off as he."

"I, Mr. Lavanne? How can you say that? Was I not in your employment? What motive could I have for such an act?"

"What motive can Corson have had?"

"I am free to confess," replied the detective, "that I am all at sea on that point. I know that he is playing some deep game, but can't even guess what his purpose is in playing it. But I mean to get at the bottom, both of the game and of the purpose, and to break them both up."

"You must do it on your own expense, then," said Lavanne, "as I am unwilling to supply you with any more money for working out what I consider an utterly absurd theory."

"I will do it, Mr. Lavanne, at my own expense and risk."

"Very well. My friend Corson is also going to search for Juliet."

"None can find so well as those who hide," said Sharpless, determined to have the last word.

CHAPTER IX.

SHARPLESS IS BAFFLED.

In the profession which he had adopted, Mr. Benjamin had schooled himself to suppress his emotions, and had endeavored to train his features so that, to use one of his favorite phrases, they should not "give him away."

But his training was not of much use to him when he was introduced to Miss Harriet Lessing in the parlor of the Grosse Tete mansion.

His face turned red, he fell back a step or two, and he uttered, against his will, an exclamation of astonishment.

Miss Lessing, who had advanced smilingly to greet him, appeared to be surprised equally with himself; but it was evident that the cause of her surprise was his strange demonstration.

"What is the matter with you, man?" asked Vaudrey Lavanne.

The detective quickly recovered his self-possession.

"I don't understand," he replied, "why you are looking for your niece, Miss Juliet Lavanne, when she is here in the house."

The master of Grosse Tete laughed heartily, his wife permitted herself to smile, and Hector stretched his mouth in a broad grin.

"This is decidedly the best joke of the season," said Lavanne. "Why, Sharpless, have your wits gone wool-gathering? What has become of your theory?"

"Do you mean to say," asked the detective, "that this young lady is not your niece, Juliet Lavanne?"

"Of course I do. We know that there is a resemblance, but I should not have thought that it would deceive you, who have seen Juliet lately, and who ought to be a better judge of that sort of thing than you seem to be."

Harriet Lessing had by this time resumed her seat, and was looking straight at Sharpless, her expressive features showing only an amused interest in the discussion.

"The resemblance has deceived me very easily—if I am deceived," said the detective. "If this young lady is not Juliet Lavanne, who is she?"

"There you are again," replied Lavanne; "but this time I can easily answer you. The young lady is Miss Harriet Lessing, of Ravenna, Ohio, whom I engaged as a companion for Juliet, on the recommendation of my friend, John Derickson, of Vicksburg. Miss Lessing, are you acquainted with this gentleman?"

The young lady answered that, except so far as Mr. Lavanne's recent introduction went, she did not have that honor.

"As I told you, Sharpless," said Vaudrey Lavanne, "we know all about that resemblance, and you are not the first who has noticed it. It struck Mr. Corson quite forcibly, and he called our attention to it; but, when he observed Miss Lessing more closely, he easily perceived the points of difference between her and my niece, the one being a decided blonde, and the other as decided a brunette, and we concurred in his opinion."

"It is a long time since you have seen Miss Lavanne," persisted Sharpless. "For my part, I scarcely consider her a brunette."

"You astonish me," said Mrs. Lavanne. "When that girl left us her hair was dark, and I am sure that it must be quite black by this time."

The detective might have said that ladies had learned how to bleach their hair; but he held his peace on that point, as he perceived that it was useless to argue the question any further at that time.

"I am sure," continued Mrs. Lavanne, "that there is a vast difference between such a dark and sullen little chit as Juliet Lavanne, and a young lady of bright features and pleasant manners, such as Miss Lessing. If you want to see a real resemblance, you should look at the portrait of Juliet's mother, and compare it with this young lady."

Sharpless said that he would like to see that portrait, and was taken to Miss Lessing's room, where it ornamented the wall. After examining it closely, he merely remarked that it strikingly resembled Miss Lessing, and dropped the subject.

The fact is that the detective saw that both Vaudrey Lavanne and his wife were not to be convinced. Their impressions of Juliet, aided by their inveterate prejudice against her, had caused them to settle it in their minds that she was not to be compared, in personal appearance or in manner, with Miss Lessing, and Moses Corson had so artfully drawn their attention to the points of resemblance and of difference between the two, that their fixed opinion was not to be changed by anything short of absolute proof of the identity of Juliet Lavanne with Harriet Lessing.

At the same time he was not at all shaken in his own opinion. He was sure that Juliet Lavanne had been placed in the Grosse Tete household by Moses Corson, who had planned the deception, and was then aiding it. What possible object Corson could have had in doing this, and what sort of a game he was playing, was a problem which Sharpless did not then pretend to be able to solve. He only knew that his reasoning brought him inevitably to that point, and believed that future developments would confirm the deductions he had drawn.

His final conclusions might be summed up in these words:

"It is useless to try to convince these people at present, as they are fully determined not to be convinced. I am sure that the trail of Mississippi Mose and Juliet Lavanne, if followed successfully, will bring me to Grosse Tete. If it does bring me here, I shall find Juliet Lavanne here, and shall prove her to be Juliet Lavanne. If it should not bring me here, as is barely possible, I will at least have the satisfaction of feeling that I have not made a fool of myself. So there is nothing for me to do but follow that trail, and it is certain that I shall say nothing about this discovery to the young man I met in Memphis, as he would be likely to come here at once and raise the Old Harry."

Before he left Grosse Tete Sharpless decided that he would make just one more effort, and he persuaded Vaudrey Lavanne to write a telegram under his direction, addressed to the gentleman at Ravenna, Ohio, who had been named as a reference by Harriet Lessing, asking who that young lady was, and whether the reference she had given was authorized. This dispatch was sent to the nearest telegraph station, and forwarded, and Sharpless anxiously awaited the reply.

But Moses Corson was no slouch in attending thoroughly to all the details of any matter of business which he took in hand, and his "deep game" which Sharpless suspected him of playing was assuredly well guarded at all points.

In due time there came an answer to Mr. Lavanne's telegram, stating that Miss Harriet Lessing was a highly respectable young lady of Ravenna; that she was fully authorized to refer to the gentleman of whom she had spoken; and that further particulars would be sent by mail if desired.

If Vaudrey Lavanne and his wife had any lingering doubt in the matter, it was dissipated by this telegram, and Benjamin Sharpless, completely baffled, and for the moment discouraged, left Grosse Tete, without saying definitely whether he expected to continue the search for the missing Juliet Lavanne.

In the mean time, and particularly after the departure of Sharpless, Harriet Lessing's life was not a happy one.

She was treated better than ever by Vaudrey Lavanne, and his wife showed her more consideration than previously; but she had grievous troubles of her own.

She was not only worried by her separation from Walter Preston, and by her inability to inform him of her situation, but the attentions of Hector Lavanne became more odious and more formidable.

That young gentleman was rapidly becoming an adept in the art of what he considered love making. It is true that refined ladies might regard his style as a coarse and brutal one; but it was backed by the broad acres and large value of Grosse Tete, which ought to atone for many deficiencies.

The comparison of Juliet Lavanne with Harriet Lessing, which had interested the family circle, gave him an opportunity to highly compliment Miss Lessing at the expense of his cousin, and those clumsy compliments annoyed the young lady, though they amused her.

"You ain't a bit like Juliet," he said. "She was a peevish, sour-tempered little fool, and not at all pretty, while you are smart and sweet, and as handsome as a picture. Oh, I tell you, Juliet Lavanne could never be a marker to you. I don't know why my folks want me to marry her, as she is as poor as a church mouse. If she was rich, that wouldn't matter to me, as I will own all Grosse Tete some day. I mean to take a wife to please myself, and have already picked her out."

"I hope you will succeed in pleasing yourself," remarked Miss Lessing.

"You bet I will. Now I suppose you would like to know who I have picked out. It ain't anybody but yourself, Miss Lessing. I mean to marry you or nobody."

"I am sorry to say, then," she replied, "that you are likely to die an old bachelor."

"Wh-a-at! Did you understand me? Did you hear me say that I want to marry you?"

"That is what I understood, Mr. Lavanne. I hope I will not offend you, but I must respectfully decline your offer."

"You can't mean it; Miss Lessing. Why, I am the owner of Grosse Tete, or will be. You must be joking."

"No, sir; I am quite in earnest. It is impossible that I should marry you, and now I ask you to excuse me."

As they happened to be near the house when this point was reached, she slipped away, leaving Hector Lavanne to his black looks and his wrathful meditations.

Hector's infatuation did not escape the watchful eyes of his mother. She had failed to notice its beginning, but could not long remain blind to it. The scene at which he made his declaration was witnessed by her, and when Harriet Lessing entered the house, she confronted her, and took her to task.

"I have frequently seen you with my son of late," remarked the mistress of Grosse Tete.

"At least you may have frequently seen him with me," replied the companion.

"It is possible, Miss Lessing, that he may take it into his head to make love to you."

"That is quite likely."

"Indeed!" exclaimed Mrs. Lavanne. "You surely have a good opinion of your own attractions. Do you suppose that the heir of Grosse Tete could be so foolish as to make love to you in earnest, or to any other girl who has no fortune but her face?"

"I only know that he has done so," quietly replied Miss Lessing.

"You confess it very coolly."

"I beg your pardon, Mrs. Lavanne; I have nothing to confess. If any confessions are wanted, you should get them from your son."

"How far, if I may ask, has this love making gone?"

"As far as it could. He has just asked me to become his wife."

"Mercy on us! And you?—but, of course—"

"Of course, if you will excuse me for interrupting you, I answered him as my duty and my inclination prompted."

"You accepted him, then?"

"I refused him, Mrs. Laranne, as respectfully and kindly as I could, but at the same time as firmly as I could. I was sorry to offend him, and hope I have not offended you."

"Really, Miss Lessing, you astonish me. It is not every girl who would refuse such an offer from the heir of such a property as Grosse Tete."

"I refused him for the best of reasons—because I could not love him, and because I am engaged to a young gentleman in Ohio. We are both poor, and I have relied upon my employment here to help me on until we can marry. I assure you that I would not wish to peril that employment by encouraging the attentions of your son."

"You have spoken very frankly," said Mrs. Laranne, "and I am bound to believe you. I hope that your refusal has made an end of the matter."

CHAPTER X.

AN UNEXPECTED ENCOUNTER.

SHARPLESS had directed Walter Preston to wait for him at Vicksburg. When he returned to that city from Grosse Tete, he learned that something had happened, which, although in the line of his desired revenge, had not entered into his calculations, and might seriously interfere with his arrangements.

Young Preston, finding himself a stranger in a strange city, naturally became lonesome. Deeply troubled by the mysterious disappearance of Juliet Lavanne, and anxious to pursue and punish the man who was accused of having decoyed her away, he was exceedingly restless and uneasy.

After he had seen the sights of Vicksburg, which were few in number and mainly interesting because of the famous siege, he sought to rid himself of the weary load of time by playing billiards. As he was fond of the game, and quite a skillful player, this resource served him very well, and he made several acquaintances among the young men with whom he played. As he had selected a first-class establishment for indulgence in this amusement, he had no repetition of his experience at the pool table in Memphis.

But a different and more exciting experience was in store for him.

One evening, during the progress of a game, he had stepped to the bar with his antagonist to get a cigar, and was lighting his weed, when his attention was attracted to a tall and fine-looking gentleman, who came in with a party of friends, and called for liquid refreshments at the bar.

This well-dressed, handsome and dignified middle-aged gentleman could be nothing less, it seemed to Walter Preston, than one of the aristocrats of the South, perhaps a prominent politician, a wealthy planter, or a successful business man.

He inquired concerning the man who had so strongly fixed his attention, and his acquaintance answered his inquiries readily enough.

"That," said he, "is one of the best known gamblers on the river. His name is Moses Corson, and he is sometimes styled Mississippi Mose, though it would hardly be safe to give him that name in conversation with him. He goes with none but swells and solid men, and has the reputation, strange as it may seem, of playing a square game."

"Is that really Moses Corson?" asked Walter.

"Are you sure?"

"Of course I am. Everybody here knows him. Why do you take such an interest in him?"

"I take a decided interest in that man. I have an account to settle with him."

"Take care, Preston," said his friend, as he noticed the young man's excited manner and fierce expression of countenance. "Moses Corson is a dangerous customer, and it is not safe to meddle with him."

"He has meddled with me," haughtily replied Walter, "and he must answer for his meddling."

With this he started toward the end of the counter at which Moses Corson and his friends were drinking.

His brief discussion with his billiard acquaintance, and his sharp and angry tones, had been observed by several in the saloon, and that sort of attention which speaks of an expected encounter was turned upon him as he advanced.

Among those whose curiosity was excited was Moses Corson himself; but something deeper and more absorbing than curiosity took possession of him as he turned and looked at the young man.

His face turned ashy pale, and the hand that rested on the counter trembled.

"Is your name Moses Corson?" asked Preston,

confronting him with a frowning face and a peremptory tone.

"That is my name," replied the gambler, and his voice was low and husky, so different from his usual free and manly utterance that it could not fail to excite remark.

"Then I have an account to settle with you," said the young man.

All eyes were fixed on this daring and insolent stranger who had the hardihood "to beard the lion in his den," Mose Corson in a Vicksburg saloon.

"You must be mistaken, sir," said Corson. "I do not know you. Who are you?"

"My name is Walter Preston."

At this name Corson looked uneasily about, directing his glances in any direction but that of his young antagonist.

"Well, Mr. Walter Preston, what have you to do with me?"

"I have much to do with you," sturdily replied Walter. "I never saw you before, but I have heard of you and know enough of you to judge that you are a scoundrel."

At this insult the spectators fell back, expecting nothing but that Corson would strike straight from the shoulder and lay his assailant level with the floor.

But he did nothing of the kind.

A faint smile appeared on his face, but his lip quivered under it.

"There is some strange mistake here," he mildly remarked, "or this young man is insane. If he has any friends here they should look after him."

"There is no mistake, and I am as sane as any man," angrily exclaimed Preston. "I demand to know what has become of the young lady who was a passenger with you on the Star of the West from Louisville, and who left the boat with you at Memphis."

"Really, sir, I—I can tell you nothing about any young lady. No young lady went ashore with me at Memphis."

"I know better. Do you want me to call you a liar?"

"You may as well not do that," meekly answered Corson. "You have already carried this joke far enough."

"It is no joke. That lady has disappeared and I hold you responsible for her disappearance."

"Perhaps," suggested Corson, "if you will accompany me to my room this mistake can be better explained than in a crowded bar-room."

"I will do nothing of the kind. Your offer is only a trick to evade me. My question must be answered here and now."

Corson must have longed to grasp his hand and say:

"It is all right, Walter Preston. I am on your side and hers. She is safe, and she loves you. But you must not inquire further at this place and time, and she would be the first to deplore the madness that has seized you."

But he could not say this. He could only wish that he had not entered that saloon, and wonder how this young man, whose little finger was dearer to him than his own life, had been so strangely set upon his track.

"I can answer no questions that are put at such a time and in such a tone," he said at last.

"Then I will know whether you are a coward as well as a scoundrel!" exclaimed Walter Preston.

With these words he snatched from the counter the glass which Moses Corson had half emptied, and dashed its contents right in the face of that well-dressed and dignified gentleman.

Was it possible that such a man as Moses Corson could endure this extremity of insult at the hands of a mere stripling?

He did endure it. The man who had never before been known to show the white feather, or to fail to resent the least personal indignity, quietly wiped his face and eyes, turned his back upon his friends, and silently walked out of the saloon.

"You shall not escape me so!" exclaimed Walter Preston, and he was about to start in pursuit of his vanishing antagonist, when he was caught and restrained.

"You will have enough of this before you get through," said one man. "Corson will challenge you."

"He will do nothing of the kind," said another. "I never would have believed that Mose Corson could stand the tenth of what he has stood here to-night. I don't know what to make of his behavior, but am sure that no challenge will come from him."

"Then it shall come from me," said Preston. "He has done me an injury for which nothing but his life can atone, and I shall challenge him at once."

The sympathies of nearly all present were with the fiery young stranger who had forced the redoubtable Mose Corson to show the white feather. The general opinion settled down to the belief that he was the brother or lover of some young lady whom Corson had wronged, and that the wrong was so base and shameful that the gambler had broken down under the strain of a guilty conscience, afraid to face even the stripling who accused him.

Walter Preston found plenty of friends, who were willing and able to advise him on matters connected with "the code," and to carry his challenge.

The challenge was speedily written and was given in charge of Colonel Rafael, a young planter from the Louisiana side of the river, who at once set out to find Corson.

It was known that the gentleman who was sought usually roomed, when he was in Vicksburg, over a shooting-gallery, and thither Colonel Rafael repaired.

He found Corson, somewhat to his surprise, in the act of packing his valise, and at once stated his errand as the bearer of a challenge.

"If it is from the young man who assaulted me in the saloon," said Corson, "I cannot accept it. I am sorry to disoblige you, Col. Rafael, and I hope you will believe that I mean no disrespect to you or your principal, when I say that I cannot accept a challenge from him."

"Not accept it?" exclaimed Col. Rafael. "I don't understand this at all. Upon my word, sir, the challenge ought to come from you."

"That is true, if there was any real occasion for a challenge."

"Any real occasion for a challenge? What do you mean? I never saw a man more grossly insulted than you have been."

"That insult, Col. Rafael, I must endure. There are personal and overpowering reasons why I cannot resent it."

"This is too much, Mr. Corson. I declare, sir, I have a great mind to challenge you myself."

"You might do so without running any risk. In this quarrel, if it can be called a quarrel, I shall fight no person willingly, nor will I even suffer a fight to be forced upon me."

"But the young fellow will surely post you."

"If he does," replied Corson, "I cannot help it; but the time may come when he will bitterly repent the act. You may call me a coward, if you choose to; but you know my skill with the pistol. If you do not, ask any man you may meet in Vicksburg. I could kill your man as easily as light a cigar; but I will accept no challenge from him, whatever he may do. If your friend would listen to an explanation—"

"This is no case for explanations, sir."

"Then there is nothing more to be said."

Col. Rafael returned to his principal and his friends, who were still assembled at the saloon, and assured them that Moses Corson's breakdown was so complete, and so far beyond the possibility of argument, that nothing remained but to post him as a coward, with whom honorable men could no longer associate.

The next day it was ascertained that the challenged party had left Vicksburg, without informing any person whither he was going.

CHAPTER XI.

THE DETECTIVE'S DISCOVERIES.

AFTER the occurrences which have just been related, Walter Preston discovered that he had become quite a lion in Vicksburg—more so than he would have wished to be.

His encounter with Moses Corson was taken up by the newspapers, and was made the sensation of the hour. His new acquaintances pressed him for an explanation of the real cause of his assault upon Moses Corson, and he found it difficult to evade them. He was beset by reporters who wanted to know the name of the young lady in question, and all about her, and their persistency was torture to him. His notoriety speedily became a burden, and he even began to doubt whether he ought not to be ashamed of his conduct.

This doubt increased rapidly after the arrival of Benjamin Sharpless, who, although secretly rejoiced at the collision between the father and the son, could not help feeling that his plans had been seriously interfered with.

He met Preston with a considerable show of displeasure, and at once asked him what the — it was that he had been doing.

"I suppose you have seen it in the papers," answered the young man. "The reports are pretty correctly given, though in an exaggerated style. I happened to meet the man for whom we have been searching, and called him to account, and the rest of the affair took place about as you have read."

"And you saw fit," said Sharpless, "to bring up our business in a public place, even in a bar-room, and to make it a matter of common talk and general notoriety."

"I had to take him where I could find him, and I have been careful not to mention Miss Lavanne's name."

"You could hardly have made the matter any worse if you had mentioned it. The fact is, Mr. Preston, that you have botched things terribly, and have made a horrid mess. Can you not understand that such a business as we are jointly engaged in must be carried on quietly, secretly, under the cover? As soon as our object becomes known to those we are pursuing, the game is up. At the best, it becomes vastly more difficult than it was. It was of the utmost importance that Mose Corson should not know

that we were on his track; but here you have not only informed him of the fact, but have actually blurted out the object of the pursuit. Now he is fully warned, and is on his guard. If he has concealed the young lady, he may be expected to change the place of her concealment, and even to keep himself in hiding. I understand that you threw a glass of liquor in his face."

"I believe I did."

"That is a deadly insult in this latitude. And then you challenged him?"

"You have read it in the papers," replied Walter.

"As I have told you, Mr. Preston, Mose Corson is a dangerous man, and hard to handle. The worst bullies steer clear of him, and any man who knows him would as soon step on a rattlesnake in its coil as insult him. He is as bad as a royal Bengal tiger at close quarters, and sure death at dueling distance. Yet he refused to resent your insult, or to accept your challenge. Is it not plain to you that it must have been something far out of the common that could so quickly change the nature of such a man? Is it not plain that he had the most powerful reasons for breaking down and submitting as meekly as he did? Is it not plain that he is playing a very deep game, and that the knowledge that his trail had been struck was worth so much to him that he was willing to undergo a shameful humiliation?"

"I had not looked at it in that light," replied Preston, "though I did not suppose that he was a man who could be easily scared."

"Scared? Bless your simple soul! he could crush you as easily as I can break this pen-handle, and you would be a dead man now, if he had not something in view that is worth ever so much more to him than any man's life. Oh, I am completely out of patience when I think of how our plans have been spoiled by your hot-headed rashness. If I did not sympathize with you deeply, as well as respect you, I would drop you without another word."

"Now that I see the harm that has been done," said Preston, "I am very sorry for what has occurred. What can I do to atone for it? The people who have been about me say that I ought to post that man Corson as a coward."

"I hope that you will not think of doing any such ridiculous thing. What has been done can't be undone, but let us have no more of it. You can only atone for the past by restraining yourself in the future. Your affair with Mose Corson should be dropped, as far as it is possible to let it drop, and we must leave this city as soon as we can. Before we go I must make some inquiries here, as it is quite likely that I may find the trace we want at this very place."

Sharpless proceeded to make his inquiries as quietly as possible, with the view of exciting no comment or suspicion.

He sought to ascertain whether Moses Corson had been seen in Vicksburg in company with a young lady whom he described, and his description differed from that which he had given in Memphis, being a word portrait of a blonde lady with light hair and brown eyes—in short, an accurate description of Miss Harriet Lessing.

He soon found his trace in a hotel, to which Moses Corson had brought just such a blonde lady with brown eyes as he described, introducing her as Miss Harriet Lessing, of Ohio, and vouching for her respectability. She had registered as Harriet Lessing, and had left the city two days after her arrival, saying that she was going to Louisiana to accept a position as companion to another young lady in a planter's family.

So far all was plain sailing, and Sharpless was highly pleased with his discovery. But it was necessary that he should learn more, and to this end he visited John Derickson, the man who, as Vaudrey Lavanne informed him, had sent Miss Lessing to Grosse Tete.

He found the cotton factor in his office, and requested a private interview with him on business of importance.

John Derickson, seeing in his guest a man of gentlemanly appearance and manners, though not prepossessing as to his face, acceded to his request, and ushered him into a private room.

"I am now at your service," said the cotton factor. "What can I do for you?"

"I want to ask a question," replied the detective, "about the young lady whom you sent to Grosse Tete on the recommendation of Mr. Moses Corson."

"I hope there is nothing the matter with her," quickly answered Mr. Derickson.

The cotton factor was completely taken aback. Sharpless had merely inferred from the facts in his possession that Corson had induced Mr. Derickson to send Miss Lessing to Grosse Tete; but his confident air and his rapid speech had induced the other to believe that he knew all about it. As soon as he had spoken, Mr. Derickson remembered that Corson had forbidden the mention of his name in connection with that matter, and perceived that he had been entrapped.

"I also hope that there is nothing the matter with her," said Sharpless; "but I am looking for a young lady who left her home in Ohio against the wish of her parents, and thought it possible that this might be her."

"Who are you, anyhow?" bluntly asked Derickson.

"My name is Sharpless, and I am a private detective."

"Humph! I don't like that style of people, as a rule. Do you suppose that the young lady you speak of can be the same who was the cause of an affray between Mr. Corson and a young stranger the other night?"

"I have no grounds for such a supposition," replied Sharpless.

"It is my opinion," said John Derickson, "that the young man's talk about a lady was nothing but a sham, and there was something else behind the fuss. I don't believe that Moses Corson would ever do any sort of harm to any woman."

"Not a ladies' man, is he?" asked Sharpless.

"Not a bit of it. He is always polite to them, and always ready to help them; but he never runs after them. As regards the young lady who was sent to Grosse Tete, Mr. Corson acted in that matter merely as my agent. Vaudrey Lavanne—I suppose you know him—asked me to find a Northern young lady, and engage her as a companion for his niece, who was expected home shortly. I wrote to Corson, who was then at Louisville, asking him to attend to the business for me, as it was entirely out of my line. He brought that young lady here, and she suited me, and I sent her to Grosse Tete. Her recommendations were all right, and I have no doubt she is all right."

"I suppose you are correct on both points, Mr. Derickson. Vaudrey Lavanne telegraphed to her reference in Ohio, and received an answer that was entirely satisfactory to him."

"That ought to settle the matter, then. Can I do anything more for you, Mr. Sharpless?"

"Nothing more, and I am much obliged to you, Mr. Derickson, for the information you have given me."

When his visitor had left him, John Derickson reflected that he had in fact imparted to the detective no real information concerning Harriet Lessing, and wondered why he had been so easily satisfied.

But Sharpless had got exactly what he wanted. He had surprised the cotton factor into admitting that Miss Lessing had been brought to Vicksburg and recommended to him by Moses Corson. Thus he had satisfied himself of the correctness of his surmise.

Yet, when he thought the matter over, what gain had he made? What had he actually learned?

The fact that Corson was responsible for the presence of Harriet Lessing at Grosse Tete, although full of conviction to his own mind, would be far from sufficient proof to persuade Vaudrey Lavanne and his family that Harriet Lessing and Juliet Lavanne were the same person.

On the contrary, to their prejudiced minds Corson's proceedings would appear so open and above-board as to justify the opposite conclusion.

It was true that at Grosse Tete Corson had pretended to have had no previous acquaintance with Miss Lessing, and thus might be convicted at least of prevarication; but what would that amount to?

We are all liable to lie, the detective reflected, and the fact that Moses Corson did not always tell the whole truth would scarcely be sufficient to establish the identity of Harriet Lessing with Juliet Lavanne.

CHAPTER XII.

THE EXCITEMENT AT GROSSE TETE.

SHARPLESS carefully kept to himself the discoveries he had made, and had no idea of informing his young ally that his betrothed was sojourning at Grosse Tete in the character of a companion. It was necessary to his purposes that Preston should be held to the belief that she was concealed in some unknown locality, under the control of Moses Corson.

He told Walter that he had found traces of Corson in Vicksburg, as well as in Memphis, but none of Juliet Lavanne, and that it would be best to return to Memphis, to discover the boat by which Corson had left that city, and take up the trail again.

"The fact is," he said, "that Moses Corson has a secret den somewhere in this region, in which he makes his counterfeit money. I have good reason to believe that it is in northern Louisiana, not far from Vicksburg. Wherever it is, we may be sure that it is well hid and securely guarded. But I will find it before long, and when it is found, I am afraid that Miss Lavanne will be found there. It looks now as if he had dropped her at some point between here and Memphis, and had sent her on to that hiding-place in charge of a confederate."

"Let us go at once to Memphis," urged Preston.

"Very well. We will take the first boat, as that will suit our purposes better than traveling by rail."

But before the detective took passage for Memphis, he unexpectedly received information that increased his previous convictions to absolute certainty, and rendered him able to prove

to the satisfaction of Vaudrey Lavanne that his missing niece was safe in his own house.

To discover the source of this information, the reader must return to Grosse Tete.

A Vicksburg daily paper was taken by Vaudrey Lavanne, and the sensational head-lines which introduced a particularly vivid narrative of the encounter between Walter Preston and Moses Corson struck his eye as soon as he took the sheet from its wrapper.

He devoured the account eagerly, with mutterings of surprise and indignation, and then read it to the family, all of whom were assembled in the dining-room.

"It is a most extraordinary thing," he said, before he began the story; "a most extraordinary and unaccountable affair. I never heard of such a piece of business in the whole course of my life."

"But what is it, Vaudrey?" asked his wife. "Our curiosity is sufficiently excited, and it must be gratified."

"It is almost impossible," resumed Lavanne. "I would not have believed it if I hadn't seen it in the *Herald*, and can hardly believe it now."

"What is it gov'nor?" asked Hector. "Is there going to be another war, or have the Alabama boys brought over some game chickens and got cleaned out?"

"You couldn't guess it. None of you could guess it. It is too incredible. Why Moses Corson, my friend Mose Corson, one of the gamest men that ever lived, has been grossly insulted in a Vicksburg saloon by a young fellow from Ohio, and has refused to resent the insult."

"Some of these game fellows support their reputation on mighty little capital," remarked Hector.

"More than that—the young fellow challenged him to a duel, and Corson refused to accept the challenge. He showed the white feather throughout, and acted, if the report is correct, like a cur."

"He must be a miserable coward," said Hector, "or the other fellow must have pluck enough for a regiment. Who was the other fellow?"

"Nobody we know. An entire stranger in Vicksburg. His name was—let me see—Walter Preston."

At this point in the narrative attention was distracted from the story by the singular conduct of Miss Lessing.

That young lady had raised her eyes with a look of eager attention at the sound of Mr. Corson's name.

When the insult and the challenge were mentioned her interest grew more intense, and she turned deathly pale under a fearful apprehension of the truth.

When Walter Preston's name was spoken, she could endure no more and fell heavily from her chair to the floor.

Attendants were summoned, and after a while she was revived and placed in an easy-chair. Then everybody wanted to know what was the matter with her, and why she had fainted.

"I do not know," she answered. "I am not given to fainting spells. Suddenly I became dizzy, and then all was dark, and then I knew nothing more."

Mrs. Lavanne thought that her conduct was very singular, not to say suspicious.

"Perhaps she has not been used to hearing of such occurrences," suggested Vaudrey Lavanne.

Hector was sure, although he did not express his opinion, that she must be deeply interested in Moses Corson, and his jealous passion settled upon that gentleman as the one to whom he was indebted for her refusal of his recent offer.

She would not go to her room, but insisted upon being allowed to remain and listen to the account of the occurrence in Vicksburg, and Vaudrey Lavanne read it all aloud, interspersing it with comments of his own.

As the reading proceeded, her interest increased, and became very painful in its intensity; but she had set herself to a task of endurance, and went through it bravely, like a martyr, suffering no further evidence of her inward agitation to appear on the surface.

She knew that she was the lady on whose account Walter Preston had accused and insulted Moses Corson. She also knew that it was for her sake, and because of his knowledge of what Walter Preston was to her, that Mr. Corson had patiently borne such an extreme indignity, and had refused to accept a challenge from his assailant. How she admired him at that moment! How she revered him for his truth, his honor, his patience, his wonderful fortitude! How she lamented the cruel circumstances that had thus forced into collision her lover and her best friend! Her head reeled again before the reading was finished; but she controlled herself, and sat like a statue.

"I can't understand it at all," said Vaudrey Lavanne, throwing down the paper after he had read every word of the account and the comments.

"It seems to me to be easy enough to understand," said his wife. "The opinion of the Vicksburg people, as expressed in the paper, is

probably true, and the young man is the brother or lover of some girl whom your high-toned friend Corson has wronged. As for the other parties, I can form no opinion but such as is highly uncomplimentary to the woman in the case and to the man Corson. A guilty conscience was what was the matter with him."

"For my part," said Hector, "I would like to know who the girl is, and what has become of her. I never had a notion of that Corson as being any kind of a lady-killer. Had you, gov'nor?"

"He has never had that reputation," replied Lavanne, "and it would be hard for me to believe that he ever wronged any woman. I still say that I can't understand it. Moses Corson is as brave a man as lives, and his courage has been tried and proved many times and in many ways. His is no cheap reputation, supported on small capital. Yet he has allowed himself to be run over by a mere boy, if this account is true. He has shown the white feather most shamefully, and has refused to accept a challenge—two things that are enough to disgrace him forever. There must be something behind all this, or under it all, which nobody but himself understands, and I would give considerable to know what it is."

"Conscience makes cowards of us all, as the poet says," remarked Mrs. Lavanne.

"I am sure that Mr. Corson is no coward," said Harriet Lessing, speaking up suddenly, "and I do not believe that he has a guilty conscience. He seems to me to be as brave and as good as any man I ever met."

"How do you happen to know so much about him?" sneeringly asked Mrs. Lavanne.

"I beg pardon," replied Harriet, perceiving that she had been too hasty and too eager. "I should not have spoken so freely. I could only judge him by his appearance and his manner."

"Miss Lessing is right," said Vaudrey Lavanne. "It is more generous to defend the absent than to accuse them."

Hector was quite certain that Miss Lessing's outburst was caused by some deeper feeling than a generous desire to defend the absent.

"I believe," suggested Mrs. Lavanne, "that the young man who assailed this Corson was from Ohio. Perhaps Miss Lessing may be acquainted with him."

"There are a great many young men in Ohio," evasively replied Harriet.

After this she availed herself of the first opportunity to slip out of the room, feeling that she could not possibly endure another moment of the torture she had suffered in the dining-room.

Hector Lavanne endeavored to waylay her, but she escaped his clutches, and hastened to her own apartment, where she locked herself in.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE SAD FATE OF A LETTER.

WHEN she was secure from observation and intrusion, Miss Lessing gave way to her emotions, and fell into a passion of weeping, which was followed by exhaustion.

But it was necessary that she should overcome her weakness, as she had before her a serious and difficult task, and to that task she rallied.

She had determined that she would write to Walter Preston. He was evidently laboring under a terrible misapprehension, though she could not imagine how such a strange and shocking idea had got into his head. It was her duty to put an end to this misapprehension, for his sake and her own, but more especially on account of her devoted and self-sacrificing friend, Moses Corson, who seemed to be thus far the greatest sufferer in the conflict of which she was the center.

She felt sure that it was for her sake Corson had exercised such forbearance toward Walter Preston; but why had he not insisted upon being accorded the privilege of an explanation? Why might not a few words, to the effect that she was safe and well, have led to an interchange of confidences, putting affection instead of enmity in the hearts of her two best friends?

Unable to guess at the far deeper cause of Corson's forbearance, she could only imagine that an insulted man might be limited as to the extent of his humiliation, or that Walter Preston's fiery temper had shut off all possibility of explanation.

It was for her to set things right, to place her condition and her relations to Corson in their true light before Walter Preston, and to show him the great mistake he had made in that untoward affair at Vicksburg.

It was no easy matter to compose such a letter as she wished to send, to say just enough and none too much, to make the necessary explanations to Walter without compromising her case if the letter should fall into other hands.

When she had finished writing, the letter read as follows:

"MY DEAR WALTER:

"I have just listened to the reading of an account of your deplorable affair in Vicksburg with Mr. Moses Corson. I was shocked and pained beyond expression by what I heard. My agitation was so great that I fainted, and it was only by the utmost

effort that I could sit and listen to the entire reading. Let me assure you as briefly as I can, my own dear Walter, that I am safe and well, and that you have made the greatest possible mistake in attacking Mr. Corson, who is my benefactor and my true friend. I would have written to you as I promised to do, had it not been for a train of circumstances which have placed me in a peculiar and difficult position. There is a plot against me, a mean and wicked plot, the nature of which I may not yet explain to you, because it is possible that this letter might fall into the wrong hands, and thus some carefully laid plans would be destroyed. I can only say at present that the plot concerns my safety and the future of both of us. Should it succeed, you and I would be separated forever.

"I am here under an assumed name, that of Harriet Lessing, and under an assumed character, that of a hired companion. I have been introduced at Grosse Tete in this guise, with the aid of Mr. Corson, for the purpose of satisfying myself concerning the plot against me, and of doing what I can to counteract the efforts of my enemies. My uncle and his family do not know me, and I have listened to comparisons between Harriet Lessing and Juliet Lavanne, which were decidedly uncomplimentary to your Juliet.

"I have satisfied myself that the plot against which I was warned exists, and that it threatens to make a wreck of my future, if not of my life; but I do not yet see how the efforts of my enemies are to be foiled. In this I can only rely, under Providence, upon Mr. Corson, whom I know to be an able and faithful friend. I have told him of you and of our engagement, and you may be sure that it was his knowledge of what you are to me that caused him to be so patient and forbearing when you assailed him so bitterly.

"Dear Walter, I do not ask you to make reparation for the great wrong you have done Mr. Corson. That, I suppose, would be impossible. I only ask you to believe me when I say that he has been a true friend to me, to refrain from pursuing him further, and to trust fully in my affection and truth. If you love me as I believe you do, you can do no less than this.

"Of course you must not visit me here. Under the circumstances that would be ruin to both of us. Nor can you write to me while I am at Grosse Tete. You could not address me as Juliet Lavanne, as that would expose me at once. If you should write to Harriet Lessing, it is possible that the letter might cause discoveries or suspicions, and I must run no risks that can be avoided.

"My uncle receives the Vicksburg *Healt*, and I see it daily. If you will put your address in that paper, when you leave Vicksburg, in the form of an advertisement, I will write to you as soon and as often as I can. In the meantime I must again beg you to trust in my love and truth.

"Trusting that no mischance may prevent this letter from reaching you, I remain, with truest love,
"Your own,
"JULIET."

Miss Lessing carefully sealed and directed this letter; the name of the hotel at which Walter Preston was stopping, as stated in the newspaper account, having been fixed in her memory. Supposing that he had not left Vicksburg, she considered herself safe in sending it to him, but was unwilling to trust it in any hands but her own to be mailed.

She easily persuaded a servant at the stables to saddle a gentle horse for her, on which she stole away from the house, and rode three miles to the nearest post-office, where she deposited her precious letter, leaving her prayers with it.

Her prayers were of no avail. Fate was against her, and with the best intentions she played into the hands of her enemies.

Before he left Vicksburg, Benjamin Sharpless looked over the letters in the office of the hotel at which he and Walter Preston were stopping.

A letter with the postmark of the office near Grosse Tete, addressed in a feminine handwriting to his young ally, at once attracted his attention, and, as he would have described his action, he pounced upon it like a duck on a June bug.

He was sure that the letter was from Juliet Lavanne, and his quick sagacity enabled him to perceive that she had heard or read of Walter's encounter with Moses Corson, and had written to the young man on the spur of the moment.

Consequently the letter might be presumed to contain disclosures that were important to Preston, and no less important to himself.

If the letter was such as he supposed it to be, its receipt by Preston would probably spoil the detective's most cherished plan. Therefore Preston must not get it.

Sharpless sought a retired spot, opened the letter, and read it.

Putting aside the question of conscience, its contents justified him in this course, as far as his own interests were concerned.

With the letter in Preston's possession, his plans would have been completely upset, and he might have become involved in a serious difficulty. Holding it in his own hands, he would be able to keep the young man to the work of pursuing Corson, using him for the delicate and dangerous business of pulling out of the fire the chestnuts of himself, Benjamin Sharpless.

Holding this letter, he could go to Grosse Tete, confront Vaudrey Lavanne with absolute proof of the identity of Harriet Lessing with Juliet Lavanne, and claim the full credit of his enterprise and sagacity.

In short, he believed that he then held the reins of the entire complication, with one pretty serious exception, and this caused him to set his wits at work again.

If he had been in the habit of soliloquizing, his soliloquy would have taken the shape of these words:

"She says that there is a plot against her which she may not explain. This is an important point, and I must reflect upon it. What is that plot, and who are the plotters? Did Corson warn her against it, or did she resort to him for aid after she had learned of it? Let me get hold of this. As she has gone to Grosse Tete under an assumed name and character, she must fear her uncle and wish to deceive him. Therefore it is likely that she supposes him to be the plotter. She says that since she has been at Grosse Tete she has satisfied herself of the existence of the plot. Therefore Grosse Tete is the head-quarters of the plot, and her relatives are necessarily the plotters. It is clear that Vaudrey Lavanne has been keeping something back from me, while pretending to give me all his confidence, and that is a positive insult to Ben Sharpless. His desire to marry the girl to his son may have something to do with the plot; but there must be more than that in it, as she intimates that her life may be in danger. As Lavanne has shown a disposition to throw me over, it is possible that I might do well to cultivate the acquaintance of this young lady, and form an alliance with her against him. But that would involve an alliance with Moses Corson, which would put an end to my plans for revenge. Besides, she has no money. As far as I can now see, Vaudrey Lavanne is my best card, and I must play him for all he is worth."

Having arrived at this conclusion, Sharpless went up-stairs to inform Walter Preston that their boat was at the levee, and brought the young man down.

"The boat will leave in a few minutes, Mr. Preston," he said, "and we must go on board."

"Wait till I pay my bill," said Walter. "Perhaps a letter may have come here for me."

"There is no letter. I inquired about that, and I have paid the bill for both of us. Come on. We have no time to lose."

They left the hotel, and the letter which was of such importance to Juliet Lavanne and Walter Preston was safely concealed in the detective's breast pocket.

CHAPTER XIV.

A SCRAP OF PAPER.

JUST before Moses Corson stole away from Vicksburg, he received two letters, which he opened and read on the train that carried him thence.

One was from Grosse Tete, written by Harriet Lessing, and it greatly surprised and interested him.

The other was a letter from Louisville, in which he had not expected to find any news of importance; but it proved to be even more intense in its interest than that of Miss Lessing.

This letter was from Stephen W. Whitledge, the lawyer who had charge of his business in Louisville, and the most interesting portion read as follows:

"I have just received a most astonishing letter from Mr. Walter Preston, which I inclose for your information. It seems that he has fallen in love with a young lady at the Mount Hope Academy, and is betrothed to her. Lately she was called home to Louisiana, and he, having, or claiming to have, business at Memphis, went to that city, shortly after her departure. At Memphis he fell in with a man whose acquaintance seems likely to lead to some unpleasant complications; but of that you can judge best by reading Walter's letter. I do not feel capable of advising you in this matter, and inclose the letter for the purpose of putting you on your guard, that you may take such precautions as you may deem proper. I have sent him the money he asked for, and wish to know whether that action meets with your approval."

The letter of Walter Preston, which was written at Memphis, was addressed to Mr. Whitledge, and was worded thus:

"I have not heretofore told you of my marriage engagement, because it was a matter that seemed to concern myself alone; but it is necessary to speak of it now, in order to explain another affair."

"The young lady is Miss Juliet Lavanne, an orphan, like myself, and the niece of a wealthy planter in Louisiana. She has been for years a student at the Mount Hope Academy, but was lately called home by her uncle, and took steamboat passage from Louisville."

"As Mr. Brough, in whose law office I still remain, had a little business in Memphis, and was willing to intrust it to me, I made a trip to this city, shortly after Miss Lavanne left Mount Hope. I expected to receive a letter here from Miss Lavanne announcing her safe arrival, but was disappointed. To add to my disappointment and trouble, I have become acquainted with a man who assures me that she has not reached her home, but has mysteriously disappeared."

"This man is a private detective, named Sharpless, who has been commissioned by Miss Lavanne's uncle to search for her, and his investigations thus far have convinced him that she has been decoyed away in some unknown manner, and for some unknown purpose, by a man named Moses Corson, who is extensively known on the river and in the river towns as a gambler, one of the high-toned class, if there is any high tone among such people."

"There seems to be no doubt that this Corson is responsible for Miss Lavanne's disappearance, as she left the boat with him at this city, instead of proceeding to her home, and there is reason to

believe that from here she has gone South with him.

"I do not understand this at all. I believe Miss Lavanne to be a young lady of great modesty and propriety of behavior, and I have entire confidence in her love and truth. I cannot imagine how she has been worked upon to leave her friends in this style, or what can have been her object in doing so. But I am confident that Corson is a villain, and I have joined Mr. Sharpless in the task of hunting him down. When I find him there will be a sore reckoning, as this is a matter of life and death with me.

"I write these details because I shall need money for traveling and other expenses, and you are entitled to know why I call for it. Please telegraph me \$200 immediately, as I wish to leave Memphis on my way South at once."

Moses Corson left the train at the first station he reached, went to a hotel and wrote a letter to Mr. Whitledge, giving a brief narration of his encounter with Walter Preston at Vicksburg, and assuring that gentlemen that he had done right in sending the money as requested.

"It seems rather hard," he said, "to furnish funds for a campaign against myself, and possibly for my own destruction; but you know, my dear Mr. Whitledge, that I have made myself dead to my boy, and for his sake I must remain dead to him. He pursues me as a stranger, and as a stranger I must try to keep out of his way.

"What chiefly troubles me is his connection with the man Sharpless, who bears, and with some reason, an old grudge against me. Why has that man enlisted him in this crusade? That he should encourage Walter to search for his betrothed is natural enough; but I am afraid that there must be something back of that. I know that Sharpless has for some time been endeavoring to unearth my past, in order that he may get a hold upon me, and it is possible that he may have discovered that Walter is my son. If so, his course can easily be accounted for.

"I can only hope for the best, and in the meantime I must keep out of Walter's way. In a little while I expect to be safe from the pursuit of him or any other person."

Having put this painful matter away from his mind as well as he could, Moses Corson turned to the consideration of Miss Lessing's letter from Grosse Tete.

The points covered by that letter may be best made plain by relating an occurrence that transpired at Grosse Tete shortly before the receipt of the exciting news from Vicksburg.

Hannah, the colored woman who had shown Miss Lessing to her room on the night of her arrival, continued to wait on her, and treated her with the greatest respect and consideration. She seemed to study to anticipate the wishes of the young lady, and nothing, in her opinion, was too good for Miss Lessing. She carried her zeal so far as to elicit reproof from Mrs. Lavanne more than once, and even Miss Lessing was obliged to repress Hannah's affection when it tended to place her in a false position.

Mingled with Hannah's affectionate interest was a considerable amount of curiosity, which at times might be considered impertinent. She was fond of questioning the young lady concerning the North, and concerning her relatives and her life as a child, and it may be presumed that it was not always easy to find answers to these questions, and that Miss Lessing, who was obliged to invent a story to suit the circumstances, was reminded of the adage "that certain imaginative people should have long memories."

One day, getting out of patience, she told Hannah that she was tired of being questioned, and that she would prefer not to be fussed over so much.

"I can't help it, Miss Harriet," replied the attendant, who seemed to be on the point of bursting into tears. "You don't know what's de mattah wid Hannah, but I'se gwine to tell you, if it's de lass act ob my life. You's moah to me den anybody on dis place, and you ort to be a heap moah to eberybody else. Don't you remember when I showed you de likeness ob dat pictah up dar to you?"

Yes, Miss Lessing remembered it very well.

"Well, missy, de likeness hain't got a bit fainter, and I keeps my eyes open, I do; and I don't fergit dem t'ings what I useter know, neider; and my heart hain't growed old and hard, neider; and de troof is, missy, dat you may fool all de white folks, but you can't fool yer aunt Hannah."

"Why, Hannah, what do you mean?" asked the young lady, though she felt that she could easily guess what was coming.

"I mean to say dat I know you, missy, and I know you for Juliet Lavanne, my ole missus's on'y child. But you needn't be afeard, honey. Hannah is your friend, and she means to stick to you tighter'n a bruddah. No, honey, you don't hab no cill to be afeard ob yer aunt Hannah. Why, Miss Juliet, do you s'pose I was gwine to fergit de baby I feld in my arms so often, de little gal dat usened to play wid my chilluns, wot's growed up now an' workin' around?"

Miss Lessing—for the moment Juliet Lavanne again—threw herself into the arms of the faithful colored woman, rejoicing in the unaccustomed luxury of a friend.

"I do know you Hannah," she said. "I could never forget you, and I knew you as soon as I saw you. It has been a very, very hard

thing to keep myself from telling you who I am, and from asking you to love me as you used to, and as I know you loved my dear mother."

"It's been mighty hard for me, too," said Hannah, "but I lowed you wanted things to go on as dey was goin'. I don't know wot it all means, but I can kinder guess at it. I wouldn't ha' said a word now, if it hadn't been dat I'se got somefin to tell you dat I can't hold in any longer, and I'se bound to let it out."

"What is it, Hannah?"

"Come down to my house, Miss Juliet. I'se got somefin dar to show you, an' den I'll tell you how I got it."

The young lady accompanied Hannah to her nice little white house, so much neater, cleaner and more comfortable than the "quarters" of the days of slavery.

After carefully closing and locking the door, Hannah opened an old wooden chest, from the bottom of which she took what appeared to be a bundle of rags. When the wrappings were removed, a small book remained.

"Does you know dis book, Miss Juliet?" she asked. "Dis was your mudder's Testamen, and she gib it to me a long time ago. I can't read it, but it's powerful precious to me. Dar's somefin in dis book dat I'se got to tell you about. My ole man, Bob, went as sarvant to youah fader, Massa George, froo de wah, and stuck to him to de lass. When Massa George was dyin', he made Bob hold him up, while he writ some words on a bit ob paper. He gib dat bit ob paper to Bob, and tole him to go right home and take car' ob hisself, and keep dat paper, and nebbber show it to nobody, till you got growed, an' den gib it to you."

"Well, Bob, he died arter a w'ile; but afo' he died, he gib me de paper, and tole me to keep it safe and gib it to you w'en you got growed. Now you's growed, Miss Juliet; and you's heah, and dis is de bit ob paper."

Miss Lessing took the scrap of paper, which was yellow with age, and contained but a few words, evidently written by a feeble and uncertain hand.

This is what she read:

"Baby's playhouse, at Kitten's grave. Thence ten steps west. Thence thirty-two steps north."

She looked at this in wonder. The scrap of writing represented the last words of her father to his only child, and she revered it; but its meaning was a sealed book to her.

"I thank you for this, Hannah," she said, "though I do not know what it means, or of what my father meant it to be."

"No moah do I, Miss Juliet; but it's somefin mighty partic'lar, and now you's got it, and yer aunt Hannah's duty is done."

"I thank you again, dear Hannah; but you must not call me Miss Juliet, even when we are alone, as you might let the name slip out when other people could hear it. I know some one who may be able to guess at the meaning of this scrap of paper."

Miss Lessing gave Hannah another hug, and hastened to her room, where she at once wrote a letter to Moses Corson, who had given her his address at Vicksburg. In this letter she inclosed a copy of the important scrap of paper, and told how she had come by it.

She posted the letter to Corson with her own hands, as she afterward posted that to Walter Preston; but this, unlike the other, was safely received by him to whom it belonged.

Moses Corson, after he had carefully read the inclosed scrap of paper again and again, while smoking a meditative cigar, folded it, and put it away in his pocket-book.

CHAPTER XV.

THE TREASURE-HUNTER.

THE days that followed the dispatch of her letter to Walter Preston were long and anxious days to Harriet Lessing.

As soon as possible after its arrival, without making her eagerness too conspicuous, she secured the Vicksburg paper, and scanned its columns for news of her lover and her friend.

She learned that Moses Corson had left Vicksburg directly after his encounter with Walter Preston, and she feared that her letter had not reached that city in time to be received by him; but this was a secondary matter, compared with her anxiety for further intelligence concerning her lover.

She could not permit herself to doubt that Walter Preston, if he received her letter of explanation and entreaty, would insert an advertisement in the *Herald* in accordance with her request. But the days went by, and nothing of the kind appeared, nor did she hear or read anything more about him. The sensation of the hour was soon over, and the newspapers had ceased to be interested in the young stranger from Ohio. If the reporters had sought for any more information, they would have been foiled by the vigilance of Sharpless, who had decided that the affair must be allowed to drop.

During those long and dull days the young lady was not annoyed by the attentions of Hector Lavanne. If he had not accepted her refusal of his offer as final, he had at least come to the conclusion that it would be best not to bother her for a while. But he followed her with his

eyes, and frowned darkly whenever the name of Moses Corson was mentioned.

That name was frequently mentioned by Hector's father, who was quite uneasy and unsettled after reading the account of the Vicksburg fracas. He had hoped that Corson, who was one of the few men whom he really liked, would return and favor him with some more of his favorite pastime; but how could he even play "seven up" with a man who had made such a cowardly and disgraceful exhibition of himself?

Visitors at Grosse Tete at that time were few and far between, and Vaudrey Lavanne hailed as a relief from his loneliness and stagnation even the arrival of an old and seedy tramp, who announced himself as a treasure-hunter, and requested permission to search for buried treasure on the Grosse Tete property.

This person was decidedly unkempt and unclean as to his outward appearance, and was rendered almost ugly by a lock of long, straggling red hair, and a coarse and heavy red beard. He evidently regarded water as a dangerous element, and all his belongings were contained in a dilapidated satchel.

Vaudrey Lavanne was highly amused at the idea of finding hidden treasure at or about Grosse Tete, and asked the old man what had put such a notion into his head.

"My name is Job Piney," replied the treasure-hunter, "and I come from Norf Car'line, whar I've been knowed as a doctor for upwards of forty year. When the folks in that kentry want to find water, they come to me, and I show 'em whar it is. When anythin' is lost or stole, they come to me. I found a gold mine once, and lots of gold has been took outen it."

"Do you expect to find a gold mine here?" asked Lavanne.

"No, sah. This ain't no gold mine, but thar's gold money hid heah, and it was lurid a long time ago. My old 'ooman, who's been dead 'bout ten year, come to me in a dream—'peared to me, you know, like a ghost—and she tole me about this money, and whar and how to find it, and I've worked my way clear from Norf Car'line to search fer it. This yar is the charm I kerry whin I hunt for gold."

He showed a small vial, filled with a yellowish liquid, covered tightly with dirty oiled silk, and suspended from a silk cord.

"This is the way it works," he said, holding the end of the cord. "I take it in my fingers, so, and as I walk about I ask it, 'Is thar any gold yarf and if thar's gold in the ground it will fly off jest so, and if thar ain't any gold it won't move. I know thar's gold on this plantation, 'cause my old 'oman said so, and all I ax is a chance to look about, and half o' what I find."

"All right, old man," replied Lavanne. "I reckon you can't do any harm, and you may go to work. I will tell one of the niggers to give you something to eat and a place to sleep. But you must not dig anywhere without letting me know, and—look here, old man—if you should be caught stealing, you will be flogged off the plantation."

Job Piney protested his honesty, and began his wanderings about the domain of Grosse Tete.

When Mrs. Lavanne heard of this intrusion upon the estate, she made an ineffective protest, such as she usually made against what her husband saw fit to do. He assured her that Piney was a harmless old fellow, perhaps a little weak in the upper story, and that there was nothing to be lost, but possibly something to be gained in the way of amusement, by humoring his notion.

"Very well, Mr. Lavanne," said the chronic objector, "when the harm does come, I hope you will remember that I warned you against it."

"If I should undertake to remember all your warnings, my dear," replied the master of Grosse Tete, "I ought to be provided with a double-barreled memory."

On the morning of the second day after the arrival of the treasure-hunter, he came to Mr. Lavanne with a smile shining through the grime of his face, and in a state of considerable excitement, to announce his discovery of buried gold.

The "jigger," as he called his divining vial, had "jumped," and he had marked the place where it moved, and he was sure that there was treasure to be found by digging.

As this announcement promised to afford Vaudrey Lavanne some pastime, he directed two of the hands to take a spade and a hoe, and to accompany himself and Job Piney to the spot where the "jigger" had "jumped," which proved to be in a corner of an old field.

There the spade and hoe were set to work, and, after digging a little distance, a flat stone was struck.

"That's it!" eagerly exclaimed Job Piney. "That stun never growed thar, and thar's gold under it, shore as shootin'."

The stone was removed, and the declaration of the treasure-hunter was soon confirmed. With a little "grabbings" several old Spanish coins were unearthed—so old and incrustated with dirt that the dates could not be ascertained.

ed, nor could it be settled that they were really gold until Vaudrey Lavanne had taken them to the house and tested them with acid.

"That ain't all the gold that's buried about yar," said Job Piney, when the quality of the coins had been determined. "I know that's lots more, and I'm gwine to s'arch fur 'em."

Near sunset on the same day, as the treasure-hunter was prosecuting his "s'arch," he happened to be in the course usually taken by Harriet Lessing in her afternoon walk.

She saw him approaching her, as she was returning to the house, and perceived that his appearance was quite unattractive, if not suggestive of danger. She was about to avoid him, by turning aside into another path, when he spoke to her.

"Don't be afraid, miss," he said. "I won't hurt you."

She felt a little ashamed of seeming to run away from such a harmless old man, and there was something in his voice that interested her. As she hesitated, he spoke again.

"Don't be afraid, Miss Lavanne. In me you will find an old friend in a new guise."

"Surely I ought to know that voice," she said, as she stepped forward. "Is it possible, that you are Mr. Corson?"

It was not only possible, he assured her, but an actual fact, and the pressure of his hand gave her new strength and hope.

"But why are you here at this time?" she asked, "and in such a strange disguise?"

"I received your letter at Vicksburg," replied Corson. "That is what has brought me here, and my purpose needs this disguise. I believe that the paper you got from the colored woman is of the greatest importance to your future."

"Indeed! I was sure it meant something, but could not guess what its meaning was. Nor do I want to learn what you think about it, until you tell me something else. I heard the account of that terrible affair at Vicksburg. My uncle read it in a Vicksburg paper. It struck me down at once, and I fainted; but I recovered, and listened to all that was read, though it was torture to me. Now you are here, and you will tell me all about it; will you not?"

"Woman-like, you want to put your love before every other consideration. Well, I suppose you must have your way; but I can really add nothing to the account that was published. That, I believe, contained the truth."

"But not the whole truth, Mr. Corson. There was something more. There was something the reporters could not get hold of. Was not I the young lady of whom Walter Preston spoke?"

"Of course you were," replied Corson, shuddering as that name fell from her lips.

"And it was on my account that you were brought into that dreadful difficulty; and it was for my sake, and because he was my betrothed, that you spared him when he insulted you so grossly, and refused to accept his challenge?"

"Partly so."

"What do you mean by 'partly so'?" she asked, earnestly. "I know how generous and good you are; but I also know how brave and manly you are. That affair has been talked over here, and my uncle has said, and all of us have said, that you would never submit to such treatment unless you had a strong motive for forbearance."

"You must not give me too much credit for good qualities," said Corson. "I am not good, but have done much evil in my day. I might have acted as I did because the young man was so much to you, and I might not; but there was more than that to hold me back. I feel it to be my duty to tell you the truth. I have kept it from him for his sake; but now I must tell it to you for your sake. The young man to whom you are unfortunately betrothed—"

"Unfortunately, Mr. Corson? Oh, do not say that!"

"The young man to whom you are unfortunately betrothed is my son."

"Your son? But why, then—"

"Hush, Miss Lavanne. Your cousin Hector is coming this way. Meet me here in the morning, as soon after breakfast as you can."

The treasure-hunter slipped away, and Miss Lessing allowed herself to be led home by Hector Lavanne.

CHAPTER XVI.

"YOU MUST RUN AWAY."

THE morning after his interview with Harriet Lessing, Moses Corson received a letter at Grosse Tete. It was postmarked at an obscure little post-office in Louisiana north of Grosse Tete, and was not what might be called a refined-looking letter.

If a letter had come for Harriet Lessing, and had fallen into the hands of Mrs. Lavanne, possibly it might have been looked into before it reached its owner; but Vaudrey Lavanne was not a man to open another person's letter, especially when it was addressed to so insignificant a person as Job Piney.

Consequently Job Piney got his letter, and when he opened it he read these enigmatical words:

"Ware hawk! The buzzard is about, on the scent of carrion. He goes south in a day or two, probably to G. T. leaving the young one here."

This was all, and the treasure-hunter frowned and bit his lip as he put the letter in the pocket of his ragged coat. Then he went to keep his appointment with Harriet Lessing.

He found that young lady waiting for him, and eager to hear more of the communication he had begun; but he first led her to a spot where their conversation would not be likely to be interrupted.

"You tell me that Walter Preston is your son," she said; "but why should you also say that I am unfortunately betrothed to him?"

Moses Corson explained to her why he had wished to bring up his son in ignorance of his father's mode of life and the means by which he had gained his money, for which purpose the father had given Walter his mother's name, and had caused him to believe himself to be an orphan.

"For the sake of the boy's future," he said, "and in order that it may never be thrown up to him that his father was a professional gambler, I am dead to him, and must remain dead to him. I have told you this for your sake, that you may know who he really is before you become entangled too deeply."

"What you have said does not make me love him any the less," quickly replied the young lady. "Indeed, I am not sure but it strengthens my love; for I admire and respect his father, in whom my mother trusted, and who has been to me such a good friend in such sore need. It is nothing to me that you have been or are a gambler."

"I wish that were all, my dear child," said Moses Corson, with a sigh. "But there is more against me than that."

"Tell me the worst. I do not believe that you could shake my love for your son or my confidence in yourself."

"I can tell you no more now. Let me keep something to myself, in the hope that you may never be harmed by me or mine. There are interests of yours that demand immediate attention. As I have said, I believe the paper you got from the colored girl to be highly important, and that it relates to the lost declaration of trust to which I spoke to you. Your father, perceiving that his property was not really in danger of confiscation, and having cause to distrust his brother, probably concealed that paper, expecting to recover it at the close of the war. I judge that he was afraid to leave it with, or send it to the family lawyer, who might be bribed by Vaudrey Lavanne. When he was dying, he hurriedly wrote, with an expiring effort, a direction by which the concealed paper might be recovered. That direction he sent home by his servant, and it was finally to be given to you, if my theory is correct, for two reasons: Firstly, because he feared that your mother might be too much under his brother's control; and secondly, because the direction referred to a locality with which only you and he were acquainted. I draw this last conclusion from the words, 'baby's play-house.'"

"Now a light breaks in upon me," exclaimed Miss Lessing. "I believe I know what 'baby's play house' means. Papa made it for me a long time ago, when I was a little toddling thing. He made it of some bits of board and a few stones, in an out of the way place, near the family grave-yard, and he used to take me there and play with me. I remember that I buried my kitten there, and had a sorrowful time, and that papa marked the place with a piece of white stone. Oh, yes, Mr. Corson, he was sure that I would remember that place."

Corson requested her to show him the spot, and she found it, after a brief search, in a grove that shut out the grave-yard from the grounds about the house.

The exact location given in George Lavanne's directions was not so easy to find, as the grove had become a thicket, as the surroundings had been changed, and points which had been familiar to the child were forgotten by the woman.

But some rotting boards and a few stones were finally found, and then the young lady made an effort to locate the grave of the kitten. The white stone was still there, but it had been knocked down, and it might, or might not, lie where the kitten had been buried.

"Never mind," said Corson. "I shall remember the spot, and will not be likely to go more than a few feet out of the way in following the directions, which I will do as soon as I get a proper opportunity."

"And is it for this," she asked, "that you have come here in that ugly disguise, and have got my uncle excited on the subject of buried gold? But you did dig up some gold, and I do not understand that."

"That is a simple matter. I salted it."

"Salted it! What does that mean?"

"I brought these old coins to Grosse Tete, and it was easy to find them where I buried them. I hit upon that plan because I wanted a good chance to prowl about the place and dig, and I also wished to be near you without letting it be known that I am here, because you may

need me at any moment. It will be necessary for you to make a move very shortly."

"To make a move?" she asked. "What sort of a move?"

"You must run away. You must leave Grosse Tete."

"I will be glad enough to leave Grosse Tete," she replied, "to go anywhere, at any time, and in any way. I am in torture here, and am continually afraid that I will be found out, and then I know that my uncle and aunt would make life very unpleasant and painful for me. There was only one thing that reconciled me to remaining here since I heard of that trouble at Vicksburg."

"And what was that?" Corson asked.

She told him of the letter she had written to Walter Preston, of her advice and entreaties, of her request that he should publish his address as an advertisement in the *Vicksburg Herald*, and of her daily and fruitless search of the columns of that paper to ascertain whether he had complied with her request.

As he listened to this unexpected development, Moses Corson frowned, and his grimy face grew darker.

"What is the matter?" asked Miss Lessing. "Have I done wrong? If I have, I am very sorry."

"You have done what your heart prompted you to do," he replied, "and that cannot be a wrong thing; but I am afraid that fate has been against you, and that your efforts have turned out unprofitably."

"Dear me! this is very sad. Pray tell me how the harm has been done."

"It seems that Walter Preston has entered into a sort of partnership with Sharpless, the detective whom you met on the Star of the West, and whom you have since seen here. The object of the partnership is to hunt me down and to find you. I learned this through a letter which Walter Preston sent to my lawyer in Louisville, and which was forwarded to me. I at once sent word to a man who is in my employ, directing him to watch the movements of Sharpless and Walter, and to report to me. So I can assure you that they were both in Vicksburg several days after I left there, and I have no doubt that your letter was received before they got out of town."

Miss Lessing was now completely cast down. Her letter had been received, but Walter had made no sign. What did this mean? Could he really believe that she had been false to him? Had he entirely lost faith in her? Did he put no confidence in her explanations, and was he deaf to her entreaties? If this were true, there might as well be an end of all this past life.

"Why, then—" she began to ask, but broke down, and fell into a passion of sobbing.

The ugly and sordid treasure-hunter put his arm around her, and drew her to him, as a father would fondle a child.

"Don't cry, little one," he said. "I know what is troubling you, but believe that there is no cause for your fears. There is no fault in my mind that Walter never got your letter. If he had received it, he would not have failed to do as you requested."

"What, then, has become of the letter?" she asked, as she endeavored to suppress her sobs.

"It is a fair supposition, if not the only reasonable one, that it has fallen into the hands of Sharpless, who, as I guessed that it came from you, and perceived that it might give him a stronger hold upon both you and Walter. It was to his interest that your present position should not be explained to the young man, and he has kept the letter from Walter."

"I was afraid," she said, "that Walter did not believe what I told him."

"I am sure, my child, that he would gladly have believed it. Even if he had doubted, he would have published his address, so that a continuance of the correspondence might dispel his doubts or confirm them. You may depend upon it that Sharpless has the letter, and the trouble is that it not only enables him to manage Walter more easily, but informs him that you are Juliet Lavanne. I am surprised that he has not sooner taken advantage of that information, by bringing it to Grosse Tete where it is worth money to him."

"What a risk I am running!" sadly exclaimed the young lady.

"The risk is but slight while I am here; but the exposure was sure to be made sooner or later, and the time has now come when you must leave Grosse Tete. I received a note this morning from the person I put on the track of those two, which told me that Sharpless will shortly be here, and it will not be safe for you to remain at Grosse Tete another day."

"What must I do, then?"

"You must run away!"

CHAPTER XVII.

THE FLOPEMENT.

CORSON'S strange injunction, which Miss Lessing did not then hear for the first time, mystified her considerably.

"Run away?" she asked. "How shall I run away, and whither shall I go?"

"You must run away with your cousin Heo-

tor," replied Corson. "You must elope with him."

"Elope with Hector Lavanne? If I have you gone crazy, Mr. Corson? Do you know what you are saying?"

"I am not crazy, my child, and I weigh my words well before I speak. You must leave Grosse Tete, and I have told you what I consider the best means of getting away from here."

"But an elopement, and with Hector Lavanne! If I should do as you say, what would become of me after I had eloped? The scheme is madness."

"It is not madness, but a simple and sensible way of getting out of a difficulty. What will become of you? Well, I can assure you that Hector Lavanne will get no sort of satisfaction out of his elopement. Leave that to me. Before he gets far from home I will interview him, and it seems to me that it may be well to hold him as a hostage for the good behavior of his father. Thus we could accomplish two objects at once."

"Now I begin to understand you," said Miss Lessing. "But could you do that?"

"I am not without friends in this region, and Hector Lavanne would be scarcely a morsel to me. From what I have heard, he would jump at the chance of running away with you."

"But he has asked me to marry him, and I have pointedly refused."

"That will not matter. You have only to smile on him, and he will be more eager than ever. Tell him that you have quarreled with his mother, as doubtless you have, more than once, and that you wish to leave Grosse Tete immediately. It will be quite dark at nine tonight. Let that be the hour, and tell him to have a carriage ready. You need not take any more wardrobe than you can easily carry. Tell Hector to drive you to Ausonne—be sure that you don't forget the name—where a clergyman can be found. Leave the rest to me, and I will be responsible for the result."

"I will obey you," she said, looking up with confidence in the face of the seeming vagrant. "But this is such a step in the dark as I had never thought of taking, and you must be sure that it is right."

"Do you suppose it possible," asked Corson, "that I would betray your mother's sacred trust? I solemnly assure you that I will protect you with my life, and that I advise you to nothing that I do not believe to be for the best."

"I am so tired of playing a part," she complained.

"I know that, poor child? But this shall be the last time, and you shall be nothing but yourself hereafter. Think of what you have already gained and persevere a little longer. Now you must run back to the house, as your absence may be noticed, and you must lose no time in baiting your hook for Hector Lavanne. You will see me again before another day dawns."

Miss Lessing did not "run" back to the house, but walked leisurely, reflecting upon what was behind and before her.

The task which had been set her to do was both hard and easy. Hard, because it was repugnant to her feelings to pretend to be even on friendly terms with her cousin Hector. Easy, because she did not doubt that she could at once subdue him to her will and use him for her purposes, by making the requisite effort.

The young woman who is not aware of the nature and extent of the power she possesses over a young man who is in love with her, must be counted as exceptionally ignorant and innocent. Harriet Lessing was not one of that sort. Her beauty was of the queenly style, which leads and commands, and she knew it. Although Hector Lavanne had proposed to her, and had been decisively rejected, she did not question her ability to bring him again to her feet if she desired to do so. The only difficulty was in forcing her own inclination.

But this she could do when she reflected that she was about to free herself from the burdens and entanglements of Grosse Tete, and that the deception she was then to practice was the last she would be required to attempt.

This joyful feeling so lightened her heart that she was all smiles and sunshine when she met Hector Lavanne, who had set out from the house to search for her, and she not only gave him her hand, but permitted him to hold and press it.

"Where have you been for this long time?" he asked.

"Just walking about," she replied, "and I met that funny old gold hunter, and he told me some of the most ridiculous stories, and I have laughed until my sides ache."

Hector remarked that he was glad to find her in such a good humor, as she was usually in anything but a pleasant frame of mind when he wanted her to be agreeable.

"I have much to worry me," she answered. "You know nothing about my troubles and sorrows, and therefore you cannot sympathize with them; but they are neither few nor light, and you ought not to blame me if I am downhearted now and then, or even in a bad humor."

Hector assured her, in his clumsy way, that he would be glad to sympathize with her sor-

rows and help her to bear them, and was anxious to know what it was that "bothered" her.

"I am lonely and heartsick," she said. "I am far from my home and friends, in a strange country where I am out of place. Your cousin has not arrived, and the purpose for which I was engaged to come here has fallen through, and I feel that I am an intruder at Grosse Tete."

Hector declared that she was worth any number of his cousin Juliet; that she was no sort of an intruder; and that she might queen it over the plantation, if she would only say the word.

"If you would reflect," she replied, "you would know that such a thing cannot be. Your parents would not allow you to marry me."

"Confound the parents!" exclaimed Hector. "I wouldn't give a copper for their consent, if I could get yours."

"I have been made very miserable on your account, Hector. Your mother has noticed your preference for me, and has taken me to task about it. I was obliged to tell her that I could not care for you, and that I was engaged to marry a young gentleman in Ohio."

Hector declared, pretty forcibly, that his mother had better not meddle with his affairs, and that he was big enough and old enough to manage for himself.

"I have had a hot quarrel with your mother," she said, "and she has made me feel, in more ways than one, that I am an intruder here. I want to leave Grosse Tete, but I hardly know what to do."

"Just say the word," said Hector, "and I will take you out of the reach of the old folks, and they may whistle for both of us before they get us. When I bring you back as my wife, the old lady will have to be good to you."

"Would you really take me away from here, Hector Lavanne, and make me your wife, without the consent of your parents, and against their will?"

"Honor bright, my dear girl, that is just what I am half crazy to do."

"You are a dear, brave fellow," said Miss Lessing, as she gave him both her hands, "and I believe that you will do what you promise to do. Meet me here after dinner, and we will make the arrangements. But you must be very careful when we are in the house, or your mother will suspect us. You must keep away from me, or treat me as coldly as you can, and I will do the same toward you."

"That is mighty hard," replied Hector; "but for your sake I will hold in as well as I can."

Miss Lessing kept her room until dinner time, and indulged in a few tears, the effect of her repugnance toward the part she was playing, and of a natural fear of the step in the dark she was about to take. Hector Lavanne was so rejoiced at the unexpected turn his love affair had taken, that he did not stop to wonder at the suddenness with which the young lady had reconsidered her determination.

At dinner there was nothing unusual in the demeanor of those two toward each other, although Hector was so bright and elated that his mother congratulated him upon his good looks and his good spirits. Miss Lessing, however, was more than ordinarily silent and downcast.

At the appointed time and place she met Hector again, and again assured him that she was willing and ready to elope with him.

He promised that he would have a conveyance in readiness at nine o'clock, and she promised that she would meet him at that hour at the place he designated.

"You must drive me at once to Ausonne," she said. "Is not that the nearest place at which a clergyman can be found?"

"Well, yes, I reckon it is the nearest place," replied Hector, "and it will do as well as any."

"At what time can we reach Ausonne?" she asked.

He assured her that the road was a good one, that he would have a fast horse, and that he hoped to get to Ausonne by eleven, if not earlier.

"But everybody will be asleep then," she suggested.

"No matter for that," replied Hector. "If the parson is asleep, we will rouse him, and he will be glad enough to get up when he is paid for it. How about the baggage?"

"I will have no baggage to trouble you," she answered.

"But I say, Harriet, before you go back to the house, can't you give me a kiss?"

"Not now. Your time will soon come, if you are here promptly at nine."

She stole away, leaving him a little disappointed, but highly excited by the prospect of an elopement and his expected marriage.

"She might have given me a kiss," he said, "but these Northern girls, I reckon, are mighty particular."

Six o'clock was the dinner-hour at Grosse Tete, and consequently Miss Lessing had little time for preparation; but that little time was sufficient, as she had little preparation to make. She saw Hannah, to whom she confided as much of her purpose as she dared to make known, and bid her an affectionate good-by which left the kind colored woman in tears.

Then she repaired to her room, wrapped up a bundle of necessary wardrobe, stole out of the house, and made her way to the place appointed by Hector Lavanne.

Before she got out of sight of the house, she turned and gave a last look to her father's home, mentally vowing that she would not enter it again unless she could come as its acknowledged owner.

She found Hector waiting for her, with a horse and a covered buggy, and he had been waiting impatiently, although she was so punctual.

"Now will you drive me straight to Ausonne?" she asked, as she entered the buggy.

"As straight as the road is," he replied.

"But won't you give me a kiss before we start?"

"Wait until you are my husband," was her answer, and he took his place at her side, and drove away rapidly.

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE EXPOSURE.

BENJAMIN SHARPLESS was in no hurry to make use of the information which he had gained by the capture of Juliet Lavanne's letter.

It was not necessary to his purposes that the exposure which he was able to make should be made immediately, and in the meanwhile he had no doubt that she would remain at Grosse Tete, where he could put his finger on her at any time. Vaudrey Lavanne had treated him so cavalierly as to be no longer entitled to special consideration. Besides, the detective had an object to serve at that time in visiting Memphis.

This object was not that which he explained to Walter Preston, and yet was connected with it. He had an appointment to meet at Memphis a special agent of the Treasury Department, Sylvester Markoe by name, who had been detailed to search for the secret agency by which many spurious bonds of the United States and notes of the National banks had been issued and put in circulation. Thus the Government agent was on the same track with Sharpless, who believed that Moses Corson was engaged in counterfeiting, and whose main object it was to be revenged upon his enemy by convicting him of a crime. To this end all his other operations were secondary, although it would greatly lighten and sweeten his revenge if he could defeat Corson's plans and make his own son an innocent instrument in his destruction.

Thus the ill-paired partners left Vickburg together, Sharpless rejoicing in the assured success of at least a portion of his schemes, and Walter Preston eager for the pursuit of Corson, but in utter ignorance of the precious letter concealed in the detective's breast pocket.

On the way up the river Sharpless prosecuted his inquiries at all the landings where the boat stopped long enough to allow him to do so, making it apparent to young Preston that he was faithfully working in the search for Juliet Lavanne.

"When we can find the den where the counterfeits are made," he said, "then we can locate the hiding-place of Mississippi Mose, and then we need look no further for Miss Lavanne. Everything depends upon tracking Mose Corson to his lair."

This was quite satisfactory to Walter, who was only anxious that the trail should be followed as swiftly as possible.

In the course of his inquiries along the river Sharpless picked up several scraps of information, which were of some importance when he fitted them together, and at Memphis he found more intelligence awaiting him, as the Government agent had been active in prosecuting the search.

Previous investigations, with various circumstances that came to their knowledge, had satisfied both Markoe and Sharpless that the manufactory of spurious paper was to be found somewhere in the region west of the Mississippi and south of Memphis. When they met in that city, their further observations, collected and compared, enabled them to locate it more definitely at some point not far from Blackman's Bayou, on the Louisiana side of the river.

It was decided that they should at once establish themselves at Blackman's Bayou, and use that locality as the base of their operations against the counterfeiters.

Walter Preston was introduced by Sharpless to Sylvester Markoe, who, when he was informed of the young gentleman's antecedents, and of his desire to aid in the pursuit of Mississippi Mose, cordially invited him to join the expedition.

The party, composed of these three, and of two detectives specially engaged by Markoe, went down the river the day after Sharpless and Preston reached Memphis.

Blackman's Bayou was found to be a sluggish body of water which might be considered an inlet of the Mississippi, running inward from the river some eight or ten miles, with a crooked course, occasionally narrowing to a channel, and again spreading out to a swamp. Near the mouth was a so-called settlement, composed of a blacksmith's shop, a sort of cross-roads store

and tavern combined, and a small house which was the residence of the blacksmith.

Here the party stopped, and quartered themselves in two rooms at the tavern, giving out that they were on a hunting excursion, and showing their guns and a tent which they had brought for camping purposes when they should penetrate the interior.

As soon as they were fairly established at Blackman's Bayou, and had agreed on a plan of operations, Sharpless procured a horse, and set out for Grosse Tete, telling Sylvester Markoe that he was going to look for a trail, and telling Walter Preston that he was going to inquire whether anything had yet been heard of Juliet Lavanne by her relatives.

After a long and tedious ride he reached Grosse Tete late at night, and feared that it would be a difficult matter to obtain admission, as no lights were visible in the house. But Vaudrey Lavanne, who happened to be compounding his "night-cap" previous to retiring, admitted the unexpected guest.

"I have had a long and hard ride," said the detective, when, after he had attended to the stabling of his horse, he shared the night-cap with his host. "I am tired out, and want to go to bed."

"You shall go to bed as soon as you want to," replied Lavanne. "But what has brought you here at this time of night? I wonder if you have been getting hold of some news of that vagrant niece of mine."

"That is just what I have been getting, sir. I thought you might be glad to hear the news that I have brought, though it is possible that you may not."

"No more cock and bull stories, I hope, Sharpless."

"Nothing but the exact truth, I assure you."

"What is it, then?"

"I am too tired and sleepy to tell it now," replied the detective. "It will keep until morning. By the way, I suppose Miss Lessing is here yet."

"Yes; she is asleep in her room. Does your news concern her?"

"I have a little information for her. And now, if you will tell me where I am to sleep, I will turn in."

"Just one word about my niece, Sharpless. Is she alive?"

"Yes, sir. She is alive. She is also lively."

Vaudrey Lavanne's face dropped, and it was apparent that he would have been willing to pay liberally for news of a different complexion. He showed Sharpless to his room, and left him to his slumbers.

In the morning Mrs. Lavanne, who had been informed of the arrival of Sharpless with news of Juliet, left her room considerably earlier than usual, and came down-stairs with her husband, anxious to hear what the detective had to say.

He, too, had risen early, had enjoyed a morning walk, and came into the breakfast room looking bright and breezy. Miss Lessing had not put in an appearance, nor had Hector Lavanne.

"Now, Sharpless, give us your news," said Vaudrey Lavanne. "My wife is full of curiosity, and I am a little curious myself."

"You said that you would pay me no longer to search for Juliet Lavanne," replied the detective; "but I have looked about on my own account, and have found her."

"Where is she?"

"Here, in your house."

"Come, Sharpless, that won't do at all. Have you still got the absurd notion in your head that Miss Lessing is my niece? I tell you it won't do."

"This is a little too much," remarked Mrs. Lavanne.

"I happen to be able to prove, positively and beyond question, that my theory was correct," said Sharpless. "I know that Miss Lavanne left the Star of the West at Memphis with Moses Corson. There she had her hair dyed or bleached—whatever they call it—and from Memphis she went to Vicksburg with Corson. At Vicksburg he persuaded John Derickson to recommend her to you as Harriet Lessing, and Derickson sent her to Grosse Tete under that name. I believe you noticed that Corson, when he was here, pretended that he had not been previously acquainted with your Miss Lessing."

"That is a fact," said Lavanne. "He seemed to meet her as a stranger. But that may only have been one of his games."

"Yes, it was one of his games, and a deep game it is that he has been playing. You may judge from that whether the man has been honest and truthful toward you."

"What if he did play a little game?" asked Lavanne, who was determined not to be convinced if he could help it. "Suppose he had known Miss Lessing before he met her here, and had introduced her to Derickson. That is not enough to prove that she is Juliet Lavanne."

"I have said that my proof is positive and beyond question," observed Sharpless. "The young lady recently sent a letter to Vicksburg, addressed to her lover, the young man who had the difficulty with Moses Corson there, and that letter is in my possession. In it she refers

to herself as Juliet Lavanne, and signs her name Juliet. Here is the letter. Read it and judge for yourself."

Vaudrey Lavanne took the captured letter, and read it carefully, while a dark frown settled upon his face.

"This beats me," he said at last. "I suppose you are right, Sharpless, though I don't pretend to understand all this. Here, Alma, take the letter, and give us your opinion. You are better acquainted with Miss Lessing's handwriting than I am."

Mrs. Lavanne examined the letter, and at once declared that it had been written by Miss Lessing.

"What a pity!" she exclaimed. "What a pity! It was only a little while ago that she told me that she had refused an offer of marriage from Hector, and I commended her for her refusal, and warned her against him. If I had only known!"

"It is a great pity," said Vaudrey Lavanne. "And I liked her so much as Miss Lessing, too. Send for her at once, Alma. She is very late this morning, and so is Hector. I must know the meaning of this strange freak."

"I think it will prove to be something more serious than a freak," suggested Sharpless.

"She speaks in that letter of a plot," continued Vaudrey Lavanne—"a plot that endangers her happiness, if not her life. Can you imagine what she means by that, Sharpless?"

"If you can't guess it, Mr. Lavanne, I am unable to help you. I am not in your secrets, and know nothing about any plots."

"I have wished that she should marry my son; but there is no plot in that."

"What she seemed to fear must be something deeper and more serious than that, Mr. Lavanne; but you can judge better than I whether there is any ground for her fears. I have no right to an opinion, as I am no longer in your employment. I went through with this investigation only for my own satisfaction."

"You shall be paid for what you have done," said Lavanne, "and I wish you to consider yourself in my employ, as far as your other engagements will allow you to act for me. Well, Alma, what is the matter with her?"

Mrs. Lavanne, who had taken upon herself the task of summoning Juliet Lavanne, late Harriet Lessing, entered the room at that moment, with a puzzled look on her face, and reported that the young lady was not in her room.

"What has become of her?" asked the master of Grosse Tete.

"I do not know, Vaudrey. It is very strange. Her bed has not been slept in, and I judge that she did not occupy her room last night. She seems to have disappeared."

"Another mysterious disappearance?" exclaimed Sharpless. "Can she have known that I was coming here? Has Mose Corson carried her off again?"

CHAPTER XIX.

A FRIENDLY CAPTURE.

HECTOR LAVANNE had a lovely night for his escapade with Miss Lessing. The weather was propitious, whatever might be the mood of the fates. The sky was cloudless and starlit, and his fast horse trotted rapidly over the level road that led to Ausonne.

It was time that his companion was distressingly quiet and constrained. She never spoke to him of her own motion, except to ask him whether he was sure that he was on the road to Ausonne, and she replied only in monosyllables to his most affectionate remarks.

Hector did not understand this at all. It was unpleasant, and he could not help considering it peculiar. It was not the sort of treatment he ought to receive from the woman who would be his wife within three hours. If she loved him well enough to run away with him, she might make some show of affection on the journey. At least she might be civil enough to talk to him.

"I suppose she will make up for this," he thought, "by talking me to death after we are married."

The truth was that Juliet Lavanne—no longer Harriet Lessing—was absorbed in her own thoughts. Now that she had taken this step and had made it irrevocable, she began to dread it and to question herself about it. The courage that sustained her up to the moment of leaving Grosse Tete had deserted her, and the bright hope she had cherished was fading. Had she really acted for the best in taking this step? Was she sure that Moses Corson was a safe counselor? Was she certain that he would not fail her in the hour of need, leaving her to settle with Hector Lavanne as best she might, and to carry on her struggle unaided?

She mentally answered these questions in the affirmative, and yet she doubted and feared.

Her chief consolation was found in the reflection that, whatever might happen, she would not play a part again, but would fight under her own name and character.

The distance from Grosse Tete to Ausonne was about eighteen miles. By the time they had traveled the half of this distance, Hector had settled down to the belief that he was not

going to get much in the way of conversation out of his expected bride, and she had settled down to a stolid waiting for what the future might bring forth.

Her waiting had a sudden termination, and one that was quite unexpected by her companion, although it had been eagerly awaited by herself.

As the buggy entered a forest, where the close and tall trees nearly shut out the starlight, it was stopped by three masked men, one of whom held the horse while the others seized Hector and unceremoniously dragged him from his seat to the ground.

True to his chivalric impulses he told them that they might do with him as they pleased, but begged them not to harm the lady.

He was assured that no harm was intended to either of them, and the tallest of the scolding highwaymen, seating himself in the buggy with Juliet, drove her away from her disconsolate lover, who was ordered by the others to mount one of their horses and accompany them. It was useless to struggle or protest, as his captors were strong men and well armed, and he reluctantly obeyed their orders, following the buggy at a respectful distance.

As for Juliet Lavanne, she was not in the least alarmed or disconcerted by the assault. She neither faints nor screams, but kept her seat and her senses with the most patiently composed composure.

This was quite natural, as she had been expecting something of the sort, and the occurrence, when it took place, was a great relief to her, the more so as she thought she recognized the tall form and stately bearing of one of the assailants. She was so sure of this that she uttered no word of objection when he got into the buggy, but quietly made room for him as he seated himself at her side.

"Is this Mr. Corson?" she asked, as he took the reins and gave the fretting horse his lead.

"No doubt of that, my child," he answered, taking off his mask and putting it in his pocket. "I hope you did not fear that I would fail you."

"I must confess that I have been doubting, although I knew that there was no cause for doubt. I am only a girl, you know, and I was timid about taking such a long step in the dark. But it is all right now, and I am bold as a lion when I am with you."

"It shall be all right, Miss Lavanne, if I can make it right. I do not know how your troubles are to be brought to an end, but I am convinced that the end is not far off."

Soon the buggy turned aside into a forest road that was seldom traveled, and was followed at the usual distance by the three men.

After proceeding in a westerly direction about half an hour, a halt was made, and Corson assisted Juliet Lavanne to alight from the buggy. He then led Hector's horse into the woods, leaving the other two men in charge of the buggy and the remaining horse.

The feelings of the young gentleman at that juncture may perhaps be better inspired than described. It is to be supposed that he was anything but pleased by the sight of his expected bride walking amicably and familiarly at the side of the leader of his captors. If he had possessed a pistol, he might have been minded to shoot Corson in the back as he strode on so confidently; but he had been carefully searched for weapons at the time of his capture, and was quite harmless. So he accepted his fate as philosophically as he could, anxiously looking forward to the end of this strange journey.

It ended at a glade in the heart of the forest, in front of a stout, creosoted log building, where Corson requested him to alight, hitched the horse he had been riding, and informed him that he might enter. He walked in, followed by Corson and Juliet.

He found himself in a small, square room, which was made yet smaller by a curtain of blankets that cut off a portion of the rear end. The floor was of rough boards, and the furniture was scanty and rude.

Moses Corson placed chairs for Juliet and Hector, but placed them at opposite sides of the room, and seated himself near the young lady.

"This is the best accommodation I can offer you, Mr. Lavanne," he said; "but you are heartily welcome, and I hope you will make yourself at home."

This was pretty cool, under the circumstances, and Hector Lavanne resented its coolness.

"I want to know what this means, Mr. Corson," he said. "By what right have you stopped Miss Lessing and me on a public road, and brought us to this place?"

"By no right at all," was the quiet reply. "I did it simply because I was able to do it."

"I think I see through your schemes, sir, and through her schemes, too. I am not as easy to fool as you seem to suppose. I have seen you and Miss Lessing walking and talking together, and I know that one and one make two."

"Really, Mr. Lavanne, I don't know what you are trying to get at," remarked Corson.

"It is plain enough, and I now see why she took such a sudden notion to me, after she had refused and snubbed me. She persuaded me to

run off with her, so that she might be brought here and marry you."

"Indeed, Mr. Lavanne, you were never more mistaken in your life. I have no more idea of marrying this young lady than I have of marrying you. But you are evidently not acquainted with her."

"I know Miss Lessing too well for my own comfort," replied Hector.

"Allow me to introduce you. This young lady, whom you have known as Harriet Lessing, is Juliet Lavanne, your cousin."

"Oh, bosh!" exclaimed Hector. "I have heard that sort of talk before, and you were the one who stood out against it. If you were telling the truth then, you are not telling it now, by a long shot."

"If I remember rightly, I told no untruth; though I was careful not to reveal the entire truth. At all events, I am telling you the exact truth now, and your cousin will indorse what I say."

Hector bluntly declared that after what he had seen and heard he would not believe either of them.

"Very well, Mr. Lavanne. You may believe or disbelieve, as you choose; but I must inform you that your cousin perceived that her uncle and aunt were hostile to her and her interests, and had good reason to know that even you would have hated her if you had supposed her to be Juliet Lavanne. So, when it became evident that she could no longer be safe at Grosse Tete, she left that place by my advice, and I must admit that a little stratagem was employed to make you the instrument of her departure. But that is not quite the entire purpose of the stratagem. As your father wished to hold Miss Juliet in his possession to advance his interests, she is now of the opinion that she will do well to hold his son in her possession to advance her own interests. Therefore I, as her agent, mean to keep you securely until certain rights which she claims to have are conceded."

"I have not the least notion of what you are talking about," protested Hector. "I don't take it in at all."

"There are some matters, Mr. Lavanne, which you may not have been informed about, although they closely concern yourself. But your cousin understands them, and I understand them, and the time will probably come when they will be clear to you."

"Confound that chatter! I am tired of it. What do you mean when you say that you are going to keep me securely? That's what I want to know."

"I am sorry to inform you, Mr. Lavanne, that you must consider yourself a prisoner. You will be as well treated as circumstances allow, but you cannot return to Grosse Tete for a while."

Hector stoutly declared that nobody could keep him as a prisoner, and he would like to see the man who would make the attempt.

Mr. Corson raised a trap-door in the rough flooring, disclosing a dark and cavernous opening.

"That man stands before you," he said, "and this is what I may style your dungeon. When you get down there, you will find it a more comfortable place than it now appears to be."

Hector made a rush for the door, but it was securely fastened.

"It will not be worth while for you to make any sort of resistance, Mr. Lavanne," said Corson. "If you refuse to descend into that comfortable dungeon of mine, I will put you down there. I am man enough to manage two such fellows as you."

Hector finally concluded that submission would be for him the better part of valor, and he went down through the trap-door by a rude staircase, Corson following him with a light.

CHAPTER XX. STOLE AWAY!

This underground apartment into which Hector Lavanne was introduced was smaller than the room above it, but had a more inviting appearance, in spite of its location. Indeed, Moses Corson had not largely exaggerated when he described it as comfortable.

It contained a small stove, connecting by a pipe with the chimney of the log-house, an easy-chair, a writing-desk, a trunk, a large pile of blankets, and an old-fashioned cupboard that looked as if it ought to contain something good to eat or drink.

Wood and kindling were in the little stove, to which Corson touched a light, and in a few minutes he had a bright fire blazing.

"It is a little damp down here," he said, "but that evil will soon be corrected, and you can keep the fire burning if you choose to add a bit of wood to it now and then. You had better make yourself as comfortable as you can, as you may have to remain here for several days."

Hector, who had seated himself in the easy-chair, remained sullenly silent.

Corson opened the cupboard, disclosing several bottles and boxes.

"Here you will find wine," he said, "or whisky, whichever you prefer; also a supply of cigars. I can reconmend the fluids and the cigars, as they were selected by myself. In the

corner you may see a plenty of blankets, which will make a good couch when you wish to retire."

The young gentleman made no answer to these hospitable suggestions.

Corson wished him a good sleep and pleasant dreams, assured him that his breakfast would be brought to him in the morning, and ascended to the upper apartment, closing and fastening the trap door.

It need not be supposed that Hector Lavanne was the kind of young man who would accept and patiently endure such a situation.

As he had said, he was no fool, though rather slow and heavy-headed, and he had plenty of pluck and determination. He had wisely submitted to superior force, because he felt that his condition could be in no respect improved by a useless attempt at resistance; but the spirit of rebellion had been strong within him, though he had committed no overt act.

He was not going to be kept shut up, like a rat in a hole, without using all his skill and strength in an attempt to escape. Not only was the idea of captivity extremely repugnant to him, but he wanted to resent the indignity with which he had been treated. He knew that he had been used as a dupe by Corson and Miss Lessing, as he still chose to call her, and he fairly ached for a chance to retaliate in some way.

Although he believed that the secret understanding between Corson and the young lady was such as he declared it to be, there might be something in the statements that had been made to him concerning the family difficulties that were at the bottom of his abduction. If Corson wanted to marry the young lady it could not be necessary to his purpose that he should keep Hector Lavanne as a prisoner, or even that he should have brought him to that hiding-place in the forest. It must be that Corson really intended some kind of coercion of Vaudrey Lavanne by the capture of his son, and it was highly important, Hector thought, that his father should be informed of the conspiracy against him.

Thus the young gentleman had plenty of incentives to escape, and, as his mettle was up, he was determined to do his best to effect his deliverance.

He opened the cupboard, helped himself to a liberal allowance of wine, lighted a cigar, and sat down to meditate.

What sort of a place was that in which he found himself? was the first problem presented for his solution, and on this depended his chances of escape.

Why should such a man as Moses Corson have established such a retreat in the heart of a forest? There was nothing unusual in the log-house, except that it evidently was not used for any of the purposes for which log houses are generally intended. But a log-house with a cellar, and a furnished cellar at that, was not only unusual, but entirely unheard of in that region.

Corson was a gambler, and it was fully possible that he was a criminal. If so, that secret retreat was his hiding place, and it was surely a hiding place of some sort. If it was the hiding-place of a band of criminals, or even of but one criminal, there might be some outlet by which daylight could be reached without passing through the upper apartment.

Hector Lavanne, who was a slow thinker, had helped himself to a second allowance of wine, and had nearly finished a second cigar, when he arrived at this conclusion. Having reached it, he set at work upon it at once.

Examining the walls of the underground apartment, he saw that it was planked up on each of the four sides, to keep the earth from caving in; but he soon discovered that when he struck the plank on one of the sides, it did not give so dull and dead a sound as that on the other three sides, and he judged that it might be merely a partition, shutting off another apartment.

If it was a partition, there must be a door in it, and he took his light and searched for the door.

He soon found it, as it was not carefully concealed, and tried it.

To his astonishment and great delight, he opened it without the slightest difficulty.

There were strong wooden bolts on each side of the door, but they had not been drawn on either side.

Hector saw in this a confirmation of his conclusion that there must be an opening to the outer world, independent of the log-house, and hastened to explore it.

Fortifying himself with a third drink of wine, and helping himself to another cigar, he took his light, and passed into the second apartment, bolting the door behind him.

He found himself in a room a little larger than that which he had left, but somewhat ruder, though there were in it several objects that made him stare in open-mouthed wonder. Item, a printing press, small, and of fine construction, unlike anything he had seen. Item, a small lathe. Item, a bench, with various tools whose names and uses he did not know. Item, several sheets of paper, thin, light and very strong. Various other articles were scattered about the room, but these chiefly attracted

his attention. He saw on the floor a scrap of printed paper that looked like a bank bill, and he picked it up, and put it in his pocket.

His inspection was but a cursory one, and he hurried forward anxious to find the opening which he was sure must be somewhere there.

He found it. At the end of the apartment opposite to the door was a small and narrow opening in the earth, growing smaller and narrower as it gradually sloped upward.

Hector crawled up this opening, or sloping tunnel, a distance of perhaps two rods and then, felt the night air on his face. Putting forth his hand he felt leaves and twigs. Reacting out his head he heard the peculiar singing sound of running water. Looking upward he saw the dark sky studded with stars. He then knew that he had reached the surface of the ground, that the tunnel ended at the bank of the river, that its mouth was concealed by a clump of bushes, and that he was free.

Emerging carefully from the opening, lest he should chance to fall into the river, he crawled out from under the bushes, stood erect and looked back in the direction by which he had come. Through the trees he saw the dark mass of the log house, and thither he hastened.

All was dark about the building. There was no light visible, nor anything to indicate that its occupants were awake. The horse which he had been compelled to ride was still standing where he had been hitched, and the saddle had not been removed. Hector unhitched him and, taking as well as he could the bearing of the course by which he had reached the log house, quietly led him away, hoping to strike the woodland track by which he had been brought from the public road.

He succeeded in finding the track, where he made a little pile of broken limbs at the foot of a tree as a landmark for possible use in the future. Then he mounted and rode in the direction he desired to take, after conquering an inclination on the part of the horse to go in the opposite direction.

Streaks of dawn were beginning to appear in the eastern sky when he struck the public road, and he speeded his horse toward Grosse Tete.

Moses Corson was a light sleeper, and he was early awake, though the interior of the log house was by no means light.

"It is time to get up, Miss Lavanne," he said to Juliet, who had passed the night behind the curtain of blankets.

In a few moments she came out and joined him, and found him building a fire on the hearth and filling a kettle with water.

"I am going to get a bit of breakfast for us," he said. "I am a better cook than you might suppose. Our prisoner will need something to eat, too. By the way, while the kettle is boiling I will go below and see how he is getting on."

He descended into the underground apartment, and remained there so long that Juliet became alarmed, and she went to the trap-door and called him.

When he came up, his face wore a serious and disgusted look.

"Is anything the matter?" asked Juliet.

"Your cousin is gone," was his solemn reply.

"Gone?"

"He has escaped from us. I did not think it possible that he could get out of that place; but I now see how he has done it, and done it easily. There is an exit from one of the cellars to the outside, which is always supposed to be securely fastened. The door must have been carelessly left unbarred, and he has found it, and has made his way out, fastening it behind him. Wait a moment."

Corson opened the door and looked out.

"Just as I expected," he said. "The horse is gone, and Hector has got clean off."

"Was there no other way by which he might have got out?" asked Juliet.

"No other way."

"Not the trap door?"

"I slept over the trap door."

"What is to be done now, Mr. Corson?"

"This building must be evacuated and cleared away at once. When Hector Lavanne returns here, as I presume he will, with a force to back him, there shall be nothing to tell him that he has ever seen the place before."

"I hope, Mr. Corson, that you will not take so much trouble for my sake."

"Not for that alone, my child. There is something else—something that I don't want to explain, and that you don't need to know."

Corson took a rifle from a rack on the wall, stepped outside, and fired three shots at brief intervals.

Within fifteen minutes three men came riding rapidly to the house. Corson spoke a few words to them, and they rode away in different directions.

Within half an hour upward of fifty men, white and black, were gathered at the log house, and among the horses they brought was one equipped with a side-saddle.

"Now, Miss Lavanne," said Corson, "if you will mount and ride a short distance with me, we will yet have our bite of breakfast."

The fifty men and more, under intelligent

direction, worked so rapidly and well that by the middle of the afternoon every vestige of the log house was floating down the river, everything worth saving had been removed, the underground apartments were filled up, the site was planted with saplings from the forest, the ground was covered with leaves, and every trace of the work was carefully effaced.

Then they disappeared as they had come.

CHAPTER XXI.

ELATION AND DEPRESSION.

BENJAMIN SHARPLESS hardly knew whether to rejoice or grieve when he was informed of the second mysterious disappearance of Juliet Lavanne. It did not really matter to him what had become of the girl; but it was possible that her absence might be turned to his account. Whatever should happen, he had gained the point of proving that his opinion was correct, and of setting the Lavanne against his enemy.

"She has learned that I was here, or that I was coming here," he said, "and was afraid of being exposed."

"Don't give us any nonsense, Sharpless," said Vaudrey Lavanne. "I was the only person in the house last night who knew of your being here, and how could she learn that you were coming?"

Sharpless intimated that it was quite likely that Moses Corson had had something to do with Juliet's disappearance.

"That is the worst nonsense of all," said Lavanne. "Corson has not been seen at or near Grosse Tete since that Vicksburg occurrence."

"Has no stranger been about here?" asked Sharpless.

Mrs. Lavanne considered this a good opportunity to display her sagacity and to bring to the surface one of her neglected warnings. So she told of the arrival of Job Piney, the treasure-hunter, and of his strange performances about the plantation.

The detective gave it as his opinion that Job Piney was probably no other than Mississippi Mose.

"What did I tell you, Vaudrey?" exclaimed Mrs. Lavanne. "I warned you against letting that old wretch come on the place; but you never listen to my advice."

"There is no sense in this sort of talk," replied the master of Grosse Tete. "It is absurd to say that that old tramp was Moses Corson. Do you suppose that I could not recognize a man whom I know so well as I know Corson, even if he tried to disguise himself?"

Sharpless said that he had seen Mississippi Mose so well disguised that even his practiced eyes had been deceived for a time.

"I tell you, Sharpless," said Lavanne, "that if you keep on putting forward such ridiculous notions, and sticking to them so stubbornly, I shall not believe anything you have ever told me. It seems to me that the girl is not the only person who is missing. I would like to know what has become of Hector."

This was acknowledged by all to be a pertinent inquiry, and Vaudrey Lavanne proceeded to get an answer to it by setting on foot such an inquiry as soon put quite a different face on affairs.

Hector was nowhere about the house, nor had he occupied his room during the previous night. Inquiry at the stables, where he was usually to be heard of, developed the fact that he had ordered a horse and buggy to be ready for him before nine o'clock, saying that he was going to visit a friend.

This was nothing unusual, as Hector often made nocturnal excursions, either on or behind a horse, and the fact of his absence did not settle its cause.

But the colored people of Grosse Tete, especially the younger portion of them, did not differ much from other colored people in the South, in being fond of nightly wanderings, such as were connected with love-making, dancing, and surreptitious inspections of hen-houses and melon-patches. When it was noised abroad that search was being made for Marse Hector, one of the night prowlers came forward, and stated that he had seen the young gentleman get into his buggy and drive rapidly toward the north. He added that the young gentleman was not alone, his companion being no less a personage than Miss Harriet Lessing.

This witness was closely questioned, but all the cross-examination of the detective and Mrs. Lavanne could not induce him to vary his account in the least.

Vaudrey Lavanne was in ecstasies.

"What has become of your Corson theory now, Sharpless?" he asked. "I reckon you will have to give it up, in spite of yourself. Alma, my love, you warned me against that girl, and now you understand why I never care the snap of my finger for all your warnings. This is an elopement, and nothing less. You warned the girl against Hector, and now she has run away with him and married him, right in the face of your warnings."

"Why should she do that?" asked the detective. "Why should she use any secrecy, when she knew that you desired her to marry her cousin?"

"Oh, that is a bit of romantic nonsense, no doubt, which she has picked up at boarding school. She has run away with him, and by this time is his wife, and that is enough to know. She has done just what I wanted her to do, without any sort of persuading, and now nobody need suppose that any plots have been made against her."

While Vaudrey Lavanne was elated, the detective was depressed. He perceived that the marriage of Juliet and Hector would make an end of his usefulness at Grosse Tete, and that he would no longer be able to use the Lavanne business in his pursuit of Mississippi Mose.

Lavanne begged him not to be down-hearted, and assured him that he would be well paid for his services; but this was not enough to restore his spirits.

Mrs. Lavanne was also depressed. Although she was rejoiced to learn that Hector's runaway match would effectually settle the one great family difficulty, it could by no means be regarded as a blessing that her husband should have such a good chance to snub her and make light of her many warnings.

These conditions of elation and depression had not continued long enough to become established, when they were suddenly changed by the arrival of Hector himself.

That young gentleman entered the breakfast room where his parents and the detective were still assembled, looking pale and weary after his sleepless night, and feeling very ill-tempered after his recent disappointment.

"Hector, my dear boy, I am glad to see you!" exclaimed his father, as he rose to greet him.

"I don't believe I have been so glad to see you since you were born. Where is your wife?"

"I haven't got any wife," sullenly replied Hector.

"No wife? Where is she?"

"Where is who? What are you trying to get through you, anyhow?"

"Where is the young lady with whom you eloped last night—whom you carried away in a buggy, driving toward the north?"

Before Hector would answer this question, he insisted upon being told the full amount of information that had been secured concerning his escapade. When he was satisfied on this point, he admitted the elopement, but in a way that dashed the fond hopes of his father.

"It was all a fraud," he said, "the meanest kind of a game. She only got me to carry her off so that she might go and meet another man, and one who is old enough to be her father. But you folks needn't look at me as if you take me to be a fool. I have found out a thing or two that will surprise you. That girl claims to be my cousin Juliet."

"Your father is aware of that fact," remarked the detective. "I brought him the information, and have proved it to his satisfaction."

"Do you claim that Miss Lessing is Juliet Lavanne?" asked Hector. "That is what Corson says, too."

"Oh!" exclaimed Sharpless. "So Mississippi Mose is mixed up with this disappearance, as well as with the other. Who do you now say was right, Mr. Lavanne?"

The master of Grosse Tete had not a word to say. The sudden and utter downfall of his airy castle had carried him into the depths of despondency, and even his wife reserved her reproaches until he should be better able to bear them.

Hector was encouraged by his mother and the detective to tell the whole story of his fruitless elopement, his captivity, and his escape. Only once did Vaudrey Lavanne arouse himself and seem to take an interest in the narrative. This was when his son was repeating the conversation with Moses Corson that preceded his imprisonment under the log-house.

"What do you suppose the man meant, Hector," he asked, "when he spoke of family matters and rights that she claims?"

"That was too much for me, guv'nor, and I had to give it up; but I know that he knocked my plans in the head, and shut me up in a cellar, and I mean to get even with him, if I have half a chance. He and the other chaps carried off my horse and buggy, and they can be arrested for stealing."

"There is something more than that," said Sharpless, who had listened with eager attention to the young gentleman's account of his underground explorations. "There is something that amounts to a great deal more than that. I wish you would describe to me, as closely as you can, the press and some of the other articles you found in that cellar."

Hector described as well as he could what he had seen.

"Here is a bit of paper that I picked up down there," he said. "Let us see what it looks like."

Sharpless pounced on the scrap of paper that the young gentleman took from his pocket, and uttered an exclamation of delight.

"Now you are all right, my young friend," he said. "I can guarantee you a fair chance to get even, and more than even, with Mose Corson. The fact is, and I hope your father is listening, that Mississippi Mose is not only a gambler, but a counterfeiter, and connected with one of the most dangerous bands of

counterfeiters in the country. I have been for some time in search of the den where his work is done, and you, Mr. Hector Lavanne, by your skillful escape from his clutches, have unearthed it."

Hector began to believe that he bid fair to become a hero in his day and generation.

"You have seen the press," continued Sharpless, "and here is a spoiled bill that was evidently printed on it. You have rendered a great service to the Government, and you may be sure of your revenge if you care to join me in hunting Mose Corson down. For my part, I will hunt him to the death!"

The detective made this declaration with such intensity, fiercely clutching the scrap of paper, that all stared at him in astonishment.

"You look like a bloodhound on a trail," said Hector, "and that's the kind I like. I'm with you, as long as the trail holds its scent."

CHAPTER XXII.

WAS IT ALL A DREAM?

HECTOR LAVANNE easily agreed with Sharpless in his opinion that Moses Corson was a scoundrel who ought to be hunted down; but there was another item of the detective's belief which did not so readily commend itself to his intelligence.

That was the assertion that Harriet Lessing and Juliet Lavanne were the same person.

It was true that the evidence of this assertion was direct, positive, and almost overwhelming. The young lady had herself confirmed to Hector the conclusion at which Sharpless had arrived. But he opposed to all this evidence his own stubborn declaration that there were "a lot of lies out somewhere."

What was more likely, he said, than that Harriet Lessing should have lied in her letter to Vicksburg and in her confirmation of Corson's statement? She had lied to him in order to bring about the elopement, and might well be supposed to have lied about the whole business. Discovering the remarkable resemblance between herself and Juliet Lavanne, she had determined to personate the missing Juliet. It was true that she seemed to have gone to work in a queer way to accomplish her end; but Moses Corson was backing her up, and they two expected to "make a stake" out of the business somehow.

To any arguments that could be advanced against his assumptions he opposed the statement, which to him seemed unanswerable, that if Miss Lessing had really been his cousin Juliet, he could never, by any possibility, have fallen in love with her.

Although he fully agreed with Sharpless as to the necessity of hunting down Corson, he was unwilling to undertake that task immediately, as he wanted to recruit himself with rest and food.

"But he will discover that you have escaped," urged the detective, "and will take himself off, with the girl, to some other hiding-place."

"Very likely; but he has done that before this time, if it was to be done at all, and we can gain nothing by hurrying. The house won't run away, anyhow, and I don't know, Mr. Sharpless, whether it would be altogether safe to tackle him without help. He had only two men with him when he picked me up, but he might have more about."

"True enough," replied Sharpless. "I had thought of that. Very well, Mr. Lavanne; take all the rest you want. I have a party of friends at Blackman's Bayou, who will be enough to cope with Corson and his gang. If you will go with me in the morning, and show me the place to which you were taken, I will then ride on to where my friends are located, and bring them up."

This plan was agreed to, and the next morning, after an early breakfast, Sharpless left Grosse Tete with his new ally, Hector being mounted on the horse which he had taken from his captors.

Hector, who would be credited by a phrenologist with having the organ of locality large, easily pointed out the spot where he had been stopped and captured. He also found the forest road without difficulty, and followed it until he reached the little pile of broken limbs which he had set up as a landmark.

From this point he struck out through the trees, following the course which he had taken when his horse was led by Moses Corson.

He went on until he thought that every minute would bring him in sight of the house, and yet he did not see it.

At last he halted his horse where he was sure the glade and the house were or had been, but no house was visible—nothing but a scattered assortment of small trees.

"Why do you stop here?" asked Sharpless.

"Why don't you go on?"

"This is the place," replied Hector, almost in a whisper, as he stared about, utterly bewildered.

"What place? Are you crazy! There is no house here."

"Perhaps I am crazy. I don't know what to make of it. This is the place where the house was, if I have any sense at all left."

"Why, man alive, the house can't have run

away, and there is not the least sign that there was ever any house here. You have taken the wrong direction. Your landmarks have deceived you. There must be some other glade somewhere about here. Let us look for it."

"Very well," replied Hector, with the air of one who was completely dazed. "We will look elsewhere; but I am sure that this is the glade."

They did look elsewhere. They traversed the forest in all directions in vain, finding no log house, nor even any other glade or clearing that was large enough to furnish a site for a house. Then they worked their way back to the glade where Hector had first halted his horse, and took a long but unsatisfactory look at it.

"Are you sure," asked Sharpless, "that you had not been drinking the night when those strange events occurred?"

"I was as sober as I am now," said Hector, who had not spirit enough at the time to resent the insinuations of his companion. "Everything happened exactly as I have told you. My head was never clearer than it was then, and my memory was perfect. I know that my landmarks have not deceived me, and that we have come by the route which I passed over twice, going to that house and coming from it. Is it possible, Mr. Sharpless, that it was all a dream?"

The detective did not answer this apparently absurd question, and they silently left the glade, and made their way back to the little pile of broken limbs at the edge of the forest tract.

"It was no dream," exclaimed Hector, as he stopped his horse at this point. "It can't have been a dream. I made that pile to mark the place where I struck this path, and there it is. Don't you see it?"

Sharpless admitted that he saw the pile.

"It was no dream," repeated Hector, as he rode on. "My horse and buggy are gone, and here is the horse I rode home, which never before saw the Grosse Tete stables. More than that, Mr. Sharpless—there is the bit of paper I picked up in Corson's cellar. Does that look like a dream?"

Sharpless admitted that the note which had been spoiled in the printing did not have the appearance of a dream; but even that circumstance went for nothing.

"I don't pretend to understand anything about it," he said. "I only know that you promised to show me the house to which you said you were taken, and that you have not shown it to me. It might naturally be considered a house of the imagination."

When they reached the main road, Sharpless took the direction that would lead him toward Blackman's Bayou, and Hector Lavanne rode toward Grosse Tete.

The detective was clearly of the opinion that Hector had been doing some stupendous lying, the intention of which was as yet quite invisible.

Hector, as he slowly rode homeward, reflected on his recent disappointments, and was not sure but the last was the worst. When he reached home he astonished his parents by telling them of the remarkable disappearance of the place which he had endeavored to show to Sharpless, and thus increased his father's perplexities and his mother's store of direful prophecies.

But he was sure that he had lost his expected bride and his horse and buggy, and that he had come into possession of a horse and a saddle and a bridle which he had not previously owned. At night, as he tossed restlessly upon his bed, his worried brain continued to revolve the insoluble problem, "Was it all a dream?"

During his absence on that fruitless expedition an event of some importance had occurred at Grosse Tete, the beginning of which must be traced back to Blackman's Bayou.

CHAPTER XXIII.

A BLACKSMITH'S ADVICE.

WALTER PRESTON, being of an active habit of mind and body, and restless under the delays and discouragements that attended his search for Juliet Lavanne, sought to get rid of the burden of time at Blackman's Bayou by riding here and there about the country.

He procured a horse that suited him passably well, and he had used that horse but a little when it became necessary that the animal should be shod. For this purpose he visited the shop of the blacksmith who was one of the few permanent inhabitants of the small settlement.

The blacksmith, who was rather widely known as Sam Ryan, was a tall man of middle age, large of frame, swarthy, with piercing black eyes, and an abundance of curling black hair.

He received Preston with a pleasant smile, and soon struck up a conversation with him. Although not loquacious, nor apparently inquisitive, he possessed the faculty of drawing people out and acquiring information from them.

"So you allow to do some huntin' about here," remarked the blacksmith. "You hain't done much huntin' yet, I reckon."

Walter "allowed" that he had not done any hunting up to that moment.

"Do you allow to find much game about here?"

Walter could not say, and asked the blacksmith what the prospect was for hunting in that region.

"That's hard to say," replied Ryan. "It depends a good deal on what sort of game you nought want to find. You might be huntin' elephants or possums, or you might be huntin' men or women. Thar ain't no elephants outside of the circuses, and small game is to be had skeerce. The men are rayther hard to hunt, and are apt to take to huntin' the fellers that hunt them. As for the women, they ain't none too plenty—not more'n enough for the home demand, as you might say. I don't know of but one pritty gal who is missin' from these parts, and who needs any sort of huntin'."

"Who is that?" asked Preston, who thought that the conversation was taking a strange turn.

"That is Miss Juliet Lavanne, the orphan daughter of Col. George Lavanne, and who is said by some folks to be the lawful owner of the big Grosse Tete property."

The blacksmith was easily persuaded by Walter to tell the story of the mysterious disappearance of Juliet Lavanne, as it was understood by the servants on the Grosse Tete plantation and generally reported about the country.

Perceiving that the young gentleman was deeply interested in this narrative, Ryan led him on to speak of himself, until Walter, hardly knowing how or why he did it, had told the entire story of his love for Juliet Lavanne, his trip to Memphis, his meeting with Benjamin Sharpless, his encounter at Vicksburg, and his double pursuit of Moses Corson and Juliet.

Ryan listened attentively to all this while he was blowing his fire and shaping a shoe for Walter's horse, only interjecting a brief question now and then, to bring out the points of the narrative more clearly.

"I shouldn't wonder," he said, "if it turned out to be a good thing that you struck me afore goin' furdur with that hunt. It looks to me as if you are on the wrong track, and have begun the business at the wrong end. You've heard the story of the monkey that used the cat fur pullin' his chestnuts outen the fire?"

Yes, Walter knew that story.

"Well, thar's more'n a chance that you may burn your fingers without gettin' a taste of chestnuts, and you don't have to look fur the monkey, it seems to me, no furdur than that chap you met at Memphis."

Walter intimated a desire to know the meaning of this insinuation against Sharpless.

"Why, that chap," replied the blacksmith, "instead of lettin' you begin the search at the most likely place to begin it, has been keepin' you away from that pint, and tryin' to git you furdur and furdur from it."

"What point is that?" Walter asked.

"Grosse Tete, of course. That's whar she belongs, and that's the pint she was aimin' at. Maybe somebody thar may have heard suthin' about her."

Walter said that Sharpless had gone to Grosse Tete with the avowed purpose of ascertaining whether any news of Juliet had been received there.

"As he seems to be the monkey in the case," remarked Ryan, "I wouldn't take much stock in the story he mought bring back to you. As I told you, some folks say that Miss Juliet is the rightful heiress of the Grosse Tete property. Her uncle, Vaudrey Lavanne, who has been squattin' on it fur these many years, is the kind of man who mought try some queer turns and slants to keep her from gettin' her rights, if her rights are really what some folks say they are."

The chap that I call the monkey in the case is hired by Vaudrey Lavanne, and it is nateral to allow that he, as well as the man who hires him, is ag'inst you and the gal."

Walter admitted that there was some plausibility in this view of the case.

"If it is true that that chap is ag'inst the gal," continued Ryan, "you are the very one he would want to keep out of sight and hearin' of her, and he does that by puttin' you on the wrong track, by settin' you to hurt another man—like as not to pull some of his own chestnuts out of the fire. What do you know about that other man, except what this one has told you? How do you know but he may be the gal's best friend, doin' his best to help her to git her rights?"

By this time Walter Preston's suspicions of Sharpless were growing pretty rapidly.

"Folks do say," said the blacksmith, "that there's a gal at Grosse Tete who looks surprisin'ly like Juliet Lavanne, though it's a long time sence anybody about here has sot eyes on her. Suppose you should go thar and look around a bit. Her folks mought be glad to see you, and they mought not. Most likely they mought not. But that needn't worry you. You ain't afraid of black looks I reckon. A ride of six or eight hours would take you thar, and it couldn't do no harm. And that reminds me of another pint. The chap that is steerin'

you knowed that you was lonesome and oneasy and fond of ridin'. Why didn't he take you along when he made that trip to Grosse Tete?"

This last consideration nearly settled the case against Sharpless in Walter Preston's mind. He thanked the stalwart blacksmith for his sympathy and advice, and inquired concerning the road to Grosse Tete.

The next morning he was mounted and on his way long before daybreak.

Shortly after he had left Blackman's Bayou the blacksmith's boy mounted a horse and rode away, bearing this note, which was without any direction:

"WARE HAWK:

"The young one is on his way to G. T. with a flea in his ear."

WALTER HAWK."

Walter Preston reached Grosse Tete before noon, tired by his long ride, and inquired for Vaudrey Lavanne. He was shown into a room where that gentleman was seated, still somewhat dazed and bewildered by the discovery of the identity of Miss Lessing with Juliet Lavanne, and by the other revelations that had been made to him.

"My name is Walter Preston, and I am from Ohio," said the young gentleman, by way of an introduction.

"Take a seat, sir," said Lavanne. "I hope you will pardon me if I am not as courteous as I ought to be. I have been badly bothered this morning, and am still out of sorts. So your name is Walter Preston, and you are from Ohio. Are you the young gentleman who had a difficulty at Vicksburg with Moses Corson, as reported in the papers?"

"I am sorry to say that I am that person."

"Sorry? Why are you sorry?"

"Because, Mr. Lavanne, that performance was in haste and in the heat of passion, and I have since seen cause to regret it."

"Oh, yes, I perceive. The young lady whom you quarreled about was my niece, and what she said to you has changed your opinion."

"What she said to me? I have not spoken to Miss Lavanne, nor have I seen her, since she left Ohio."

"What she wrote, then, if you are so particular about a word, Mr. Preston."

Walter Preston was quite bewildered, and began to believe that the master of Grosse Tete had not the full possession of his senses.

"I beg your pardon, Mr. Lavanne," he said, "but I really do not understand you when you speak of what she wrote."

"I am speaking of the letter which she wrote to you when you were at Vicksburg," replied Lavanne, who was getting angry at what he considered the persistent prevarication of the young man.

"The letter? What letter? It seems to me, Mr. Lavanne, that you know more about my affairs than I know myself."

"You are becoming tiresome, Mr. Preston. I refer to the letter from my niece, Juliet Lavanne, written at this place, and sent to you at Vicksburg, which I have seen in the possession of your friend, Benjamin Sharpless."

A light suddenly broke in upon Walter's intelligence. This plain statement of Vaudrey Lavanne's strangely connected itself with the suspicions that had been instilled into his mind by the blacksmith. He must know more about that letter, but must gain his information without exciting the distrust of his informant in such a manner as to close the source of his information.

"I beg your pardon, Mr. Lavanne," he said. "I must seem to you to be very stupid, as well as very forgetful; but I had not supposed that Mr. Sharpless would show a letter of mine to any one. I would like to be sure that there is no mistake about it. Did he leave the letter with you?"

"Oh, no. He was careful enough to take it away."

"Do you remember that letter well enough, Mr. Lavanne, to tell me something of its nature and purport? If so, will you kindly repeat to me some of its points or expressions?"

In the midst of Vaudrey Lavanne's perplexities, that letter had fastened itself in his memory, and he could not only give its purport, but repeat some of the passages nearly word for word. He was willing to do so, because he was by no means satisfied of the trustworthiness of Benjamin Sharpless, and it was possible that this young man might clear away a portion of the fog that then annoyed him.

Therefore he epitomized Juliet's letter very fully, slurring over only the passages which referred to the existence of a plot against her on the part of her relative.

Walter Preston listened with an interest which it was impossible to conceal or disguise. How he thanked the blacksmith of Blackman's Bayou for sending him on this errand! It was as clear to him as it was to Sharpless that Juliet Lavanne had really been staying at her uncle's house under an assumed name; that she had been protected and advised by Corson; that she had some proper but mysterious motive for her disguise and her silence; that she was true to him through all her troubles; that she had written him a letter with the intention of setting

him right; that the letter had been intercepted by Sharpless, who had concealed it from him; and that Sharpless had been a double traitor in withholding from him the facts of the case, and in inciting him to a revengeful pursuit of Juliet's benefactor.

But it was surely not necessary, and doubtless not proper, that Vaudrey Lavanne should know all this, and it was Walter's cue to gain as much and give as little information as possible.

"I am sorry to have troubled you, Mr. Lavanne," he said; "but there is something in this affair that interests you as well as me. The truth is that the statements you have just made are entirely new to me. I did not receive any such letter as you speak of, at Vicksburg or elsewhere; nor have I ever received any letter whatever from Miss Juliet Lavanne."

This astounding statement again overthrew Vaudrey Lavanne's equilibrium, and he instantly jumped to the conclusion that Sharpless had forged the letter for the purpose of bolstering up his assertion that Miss Lessing was Juliet Lavanne. Surely the letter had been the only positive proof to sustain that assertion.

"Then Juliet has not been here at all!" he said, "and Miss Lessing—dear me! dear me! I don't know what to make of all this."

Walter perceived that there was more information in sight, and pressed for it, and got it in full measure.

Vaudrey Lavanne, when his tongue was once set loose, told him all about Miss Lessing's arrival and sojourn at Grosse Tete, her escapade with Hector, the arrival and revelations of Sharpless, the capture and escape of Hector, and the expedition of the detective and Hector in search of Corson's hiding-place.

Being thus fully equipped with information, Walter Preston saw no occasion for prolonging his stay at Grosse Tete, but good reason for taking himself off before he should be in his turn called upon to tell all he knew and surmised.

Politely refusing Mr. Lavanne's invitation to remain to lunch, and expressing a hope that he might be able to return under more favorable auspices, he mounted his horse and left Grosse Tete.

At the same time he left Vaudrey Lavanne in such a condition of mind as rendered him an easy convert to Hector's opinion, which the young gentleman asserted on his return, that Harriet Lessing and Juliet Lavanne were not the same person.

CHAPTER XXIV.

"I WILL TROUBLE YOU FOR MY LETTER."

WALTER PRESTON had believed that it would not be safe for him to remain any longer under Vaudrey Lavanne's roof, and had wanted to be alone, to get out in the open, where there would be no restraint upon his feelings. But he needed rest and refreshment, both for himself and for his horse.

When he had got a few miles from Grosse Tete, he stopped at a house by the roadside, where he was hospitably received, and his wants were well attended to, and his offer of pay for the accommodation was promptly and firmly refused.

Here he heard some gossip concerning Juliet Lavanne, Miss Lessing, and the Grosse Tete family in general, which was interesting as showing the opinions that prevailed in the neighborhood, but did not add much to the stock of information he had so unexpectedly obtained.

When he had finished his meal, he lighted a cigar, and sat down to enjoy a rest and a reverie, and very pleasant were his meditations.

Relief from doubt and suspense is always a blessing, but doubly so when the doubt changes to hope, and the suspense to happiness. Walter Preston was forced to confess to his secret self that he had doubted Juliet Lavanne's truth and purity. He had been led by Sharpless to believe that she had suffered herself to be decoyed away by a strange man, and surely the circumstances had favored that belief. If she were alive and true to him, she might at least have written him a line, and her long silence had strengthened his suspicions. But she had written, and the letter had been stolen from him. He was sure that the letter was here, because, as repeated by Vaudrey Lavanne, the language was exactly such as she would have used in speaking to him. Besides, he could partly understand the object of Sharpless in retaining the letter and exhibiting it at Grosse Tete, and consequently accepted that blessed fact with perfect faith. He had denied the receipt of the letter, partly because the denial was the truth, but mainly because he perceived that Juliet had been mystifying her uncle, and he desired to continue and extend the mystification.

There were several points connected with the whole business which he could not pretend to understand; but there was no pressing necessity that he should understand them. It was enough to know that his betrothed was safe, and that she was true to him.

What should he do next?

The course he had lately been pursuing, under a false guide, had suddenly come to an end,

and he must strike out a new direction for himself.

Necessarily he must continue to search for Juliet and for Moses Corson; but where should he look for them, and how should he pursue the search?

Hector Lavanne had been captured by Corson, as he was informed by that young gentleman's father, and confined in a secluded log house, at no great distance from Grosse Tete. Hector had gone that morning to find the log house and show it to Sharpless, who was then to return to Blackman's Bayou and bring up Sylvester Markoe and his party. Preston might await the return of Hector, and endeavor to obtain from him the location of that log house; but a little reflection convinced him that this course would not be advisable. His interests and Juliet's were directly opposed to those of Hector Lavanne, and a partnership with that young gentleman might be as harmful as his connection with Sharpless.

His decision finally was that he would return to Blackman's Bayou and demand the letter which Sharpless had concealed from him. There would be no collision if he could avoid one—nothing like his hasty attack upon Moses Corson at Vicksburg; but he would secure his letter, would give Sharpless to understand that his treachery had been discovered, and would peaceably separate from him.

He reached Blackman's Bayou in the night, and was obliged to arouse the proprietor of the little tavern, who informed him that Sharpless had arrived some hours previously, and was then in bed. Being very weary after his long ride, he attended to his horse, went to bed, and fell asleep at once.

In the morning he had a late breakfast, and went to look for Sharpless. Although fully determined that the interview should be a quiet and peaceable one, he took pains to examine the condition of his revolver.

He found the detective seated in the shade alone, enjoying a cigar, and joined him.

"Where have you been?" asked Sharpless, as he gave the young man a light for his cigar.

"Just riding about the country," replied Walter.

"You seem to have made a long journey of it."

"Well, I was lonesome and restless, and had to do something. You have been to Grosse Tete, I presume. Did you learn anything there?"

"Nothing of interest."

"Had Miss Lavanne's parents heard nothing of her?"

"Not a word."

"I am sorry, Mr. Sharpless, that you had such a long journey for nothing. By the way, I will trouble you for my letter."

The detective fairly blushed. At least he winced visibly, and the color that rushed up into his cheeks might pass for a blush. The letter had been the very matter of which he was thinking when Preston approached him. But he could not suppose that the young man had learned anything about it. He composed himself, and steadied his features.

"What letter?" he asked, quietly, but without meeting the eye of his companion.

"The letter which Miss Lavanne wrote at Grosse Tete, and sent to me at Vicksburg. The letter which you received and kindly kept for me."

It was apparent to Sharpless that he had been found out, and that his game was at an end so far as Walter Preston was concerned.

"What do you mean, Preston?" he demanded.

"Where have you been?"

"I returned last night from Grosse Tete, where I saw Mr. Vaudrey Lavanne, who told me about the letter which you exhibited to him for the purpose of proving a point which you desired to establish. If you doubt this statement, I can give you the purport of the letter, and repeat a passage or so, as I got them from Mr. Lavanne."

"Vaudrey Lavanne is a — fool!" exclaimed Sharpless. "I never met such an infernal idiot."

"A bigger fool than Walter Preston, is he? Very well, Mr. Sharpless, you may abuse your employer as much as you please; but I will thank you to give me my letter."

There was evidently no use in resisting or trying to evade this demand, and the detective took Juliet Lavanne's letter from the inside pocket of his vest, and handed it to the young man.

"I suppose this is what you want," he said.

Preston opened the letter, recognized Juliet's handwriting, and kissed it.

"No doubt, Mr. Sharpless," he said, "you know what my present opinion of you must be, and we need not waste words on that subject."

"What is your opinion?" demanded the detective. "Spit it out, now, and we'll settle this business right here."

"Oh, it is settled," quietly replied Preston. "I have no idea of making another Vicksburg affair of this. I am not ready to fly into a fury, but at present am disposed to friendly feelings toward everybody."

"As you are inclined to be reasonable, and not to make any fuss about it," said Sharpless,

"I may as well tell you that I kept that letter from you for your own good, intending to give it to you when I had fully satisfied myself of the state of affairs."

"Of course. That is understood. It was for my good that you got me on the wrong track and kept me there; that you opened a letter which was not addressed to you; that you concealed from me your knowledge of Miss Lavanne's safety; and that you permitted me to go anywhere except to the place where I might have learned what I wanted to know. Your unselfish care for my interests quite overcomes me."

"You seem to be getting sarcastic, Preston."

"Well, let it go as a matter of taste, about which there is no disputing. Now, Mr. Sharpless, as we are conversing on an amicable basis, I would like to get a little information from you, in exchange for something I can tell you—something about Mr. Lavanne's present state of mind."

"Fire away, then. What do you want to know?"

"I want to know whether Hector Lavanne showed you the log cabin in the woods in which he claimed to have been confined; if so, whether you will give me such directions as will enable me to find it?"

"That is the strongest part of the whole business," replied the detective. "The young fellow could not find the place, and I doubt if there was any such place."

Sharpless proceeded to tell, quite freely, the story of his fruitless expedition with Hector Lavanne, and admitted that he did not know what to think of that matter. Either Hector had lied, or the house had mysteriously disappeared.

"Now you know as much about it as I know," he said, in conclusion. "What have you to tell me about Vaudrey Lavanne?"

"Simply that he has lost confidence in you," replied Walter. "I told him that I had never received the letter which you showed him, and left him to infer that it was not genuine. He seemed to jump to the conclusion that you had forged it as he immediately declared that his niece had not been at Grosse Tete."

Sharpless asserted that he did not care a snap of his finger what Vaudrey Lavanne thought of him, as he did not propose to bother himself any more about such an incurable idiot.

"Is there anything more you want to know?" he asked.

"Nothing more," replied Walter, "unless you are willing to tell me what further steps you propose to take."

"I hardly think I can do that, Preston, as you and I don't seem to be in the same boat any more."

"That is true, and I can assure you that my boat is not to be towed by yours. I will go my own way hereafter, and you may go yours."

"That is all right, youngster, but I advise you to be careful that you don't get in my way, or it may be unhealthy for you."

"You seem to misunderstand me, Mr. Sharpless. Though I am in a good humor just now, I am neither a sheep nor a lamb. I shall do as I please, free from any man's dictation. If it suits me to get in your way, I will not move an inch out of it. If it comes to hurting, there are two who can play at that game. I am quite peaceable just now, but it may be as well not to stir me up."

"I admire your spunk, Preston, and am really sorry that we must part company. I don't mind telling you that I mean to hunt down that Mississippi Mose and bring him to punishment for his counterfeiting, if for nothing else; but I can't say where I expect to look for him, or where I will take up the trail. You don't know what a pleasant surprise I was preparing for you; but you will miss it now."

"Yes, I will miss it, and it is quite likely that I can afford to miss it. I won't say good-by, Mr. Sharpless, as it is quite likely that I may run against you before long, and then I may feel disposed to make a general settlement of accounts."

With these words Walter Preston left the detective to his reflections and went, in pursuance of a previous determination, to consult the blacksmith who had given him such good advice.

CHAPTER XXV.

THE BLACKSMITH ACTS AS GUIDE.

THE report that detective Sharpless made to special agent Markoe, on his return to Blackman's Bayou from Grosse Tete, was highly interesting, but at the same time very perplexing.

If Hector Lavanne's account of his confinement and escape was true, it could not be doubted that Moses Corson was connected with a band of counterfeiters, who had their headquarters not far from Blackman's Bayou. Sharpless was strongly inclined to discredit Hector's story, although there were circumstances connected with it which he confessed himself unable to account for.

Sylvester Markoe, however, had not been idle during the absence of his colleague, and had gained some knowledge which induced him to believe at least in the possibility of the strange disappearance of Corson's log house.

He informed Sharpless that he had found a man who was not only thoroughly acquainted with that section of country, all its highways and byways and houses and inhabitants, but knew Mississippi Mose, and the places he frequented, and the people with whom he associated when he visited that region. By the use of some money, and the promise of more, Markoe had persuaded this man to guide a party in pursuit of Corson.

"Who is he?" asked Sharpless.

"Sam Ryan, the blacksmith here. He knows every bridle-path and every patch of timber in these parts, and is sure that he can find our man if he is in this portion of Louisiana."

"Perhaps he is one of Corson's pals," suggested Sharpless.

"I see no reason to suspect him. Anyhow, I am sure that I have bought him."

The detective had a conversation with Ryan, and questioned him concerning the log house in the forest which Hector Lavanne had described. Ryan professed to know the log house well, and to know it as one of the haunts of Mississippi Mose. He said that he was able and ready to guide a party to it, if it still existed.

The arrangements with the blacksmith were easily concluded, and horses and provisions were procured, and the party of five men, including the guide, left Blackman's Bayou early in the morning of the day after the return of Sharpless from Grosse Tete.

The ease and confidence with which Ryan led the party fully justified the statements he had made concerning his intimate acquaintance with the country. Without any halt or hesitation he went direct to the glade in which the mysterious log house had been located, and Sharpless recognized it at once as the same spot to which he had fruitlessly been brought by Hector Lavanne.

"This is the place," he said, looking about with an air of confidence.

"Are you sure?" asked Sharpless.

"Thar ain't a doubt of it, mister."

"Where is the house, then?"

"That is another kind of a question. Here is whar it was, and it will be strange if we can't find some sort of a sign to show what has become of it."

The blacksmith dismounted and hitched his horse, and his example was followed by the others. He then led the way to the center of the glade, and called the attention of the party to a circumstance which was evident to all, though it had not been visible when Sharpless visited the place with Hector Lavanne.

The saplings which were scattered about were more or less withered, and some of the branches and twigs were drooping.

"It's plain as daylight," said Ryan, "that these young trees never grewed here, but have been sot out within a few days. They hain't been watered, you see, and have kinder withered down."

He also showed where the ground had sunk in spots, and removed a portion of the leaves, disclosing freshly dug earth and even the footprints of men.

"What has become of the house?" asked Markoe.

"That's the p'int we're comin' to," replied the blacksmith. "Whoever got away with the house of course wanted to do the trick in the grandest and easiest way; but they didn't burn it down. That would have made too much smoke and fuss, and some of these big trees would have got a scorchin'; but they hain't smelt fire, as you can see. So the house has been toted away, and, as the river is nigh hand, I reckon it has gone down-stream. Let's go and look."

He struck out into the woods, and soon came to a plain trail, showing where logs had been carried or dragged, as the workers had evidently not thought it worth while to cover the portion which was out of sight of the glade.

This trail led to the bank of the river, and nothing could be easier than to locate the spot where the logs which had formed the house had been pitched into the muddy stream. Indeed, one of the logs which had stuck in the mud at the water's edge, remained there, as if to bear witness to the means by which the log house had been made to disappear.

"I hope you are satisfied, gen'lemen," said the blacksmith, as he led the party back to the horses.

Sharpless and Markoe were both satisfied with what they had seen, but wanted to know what could have induced Corson, or whoever owned the house, to demolish it in that style.

"That's a good p'int to guess at," replied Ryan, "and I reckon you can guess at it as well as I can, if not a leetle better."

"Corson could not have done this alone," suggested Sharpless, "and it must have taken a pretty heavy force of men to do the job so thoroughly and so quickly. Who do you suppose they were, and where did he get them?"

"That's more'n I can say, mister; but you

know as well as I do that 'most anythin' can be done by them as has plenty of money to do it with."

The truth of Hector Lavanne's story having thus been established, it became more than ever important to Markoe and Sharpless that Mississippi Mose should be captured, and that proof of his unlawful operations should be secured. They asked Ryan if he could show them where and how they would be likely to lay hands on Moses Corson.

"I reckon I can," cautiously replied the blacksmith, "though thar ain't no sure thing on findin' him. I allow that he is either hid, or has left the kentry. If he is hid, I know the hole he would be most apt to hide in, and I will take you thar, if you say so."

They did say so, and he led them on, after they had eaten their dinner, by a labyrinth of country roads and bridle paths, until they reached, just as night set in, a piece of water which appeared to be a lake of some size but which might have been a bayou which spread at that point over a considerable extent of country. At about the center of this seeming lake a small island was visible.

"That's the place I was speakin' of," said the blacksmith, as he pointed at the island. "It is thar that Col. Corson, as we call him in these parts, would be more likely to be found than anywhar else that I know of. But whether he is thar now or not is a p'int that can only be settled by crossin' over to the island."

"There are only four of us, without counting you," said Markoe. "Do you suppose he would be likely to have any people with him? We might not be a match for a crowd."

"Thar mought be one or two with him—not more'n that, I'm willin' to bet."

"He is a pretty tough customer to handle, himself," remarked Sharpless.

"So I've heard, and when it comes to tacklin' him, I'd rather be counted out. But I didn't agree to handle him. I'll show you his places, and thar my bargain ends."

"That is all right, Mr. Ryan," said the special agent. "All we ask is to get where he is. But how are we to cross over to the island?"

"I allow that thar's a boat somewhar about. Thar gin'ally is."

A brief search disclosed a skiff which had been concealed under some bushes, and which proved to be large enough to hold the party. They tethered their horses, entered the skiff, and committed themselves to the care and skill of the blacksmith, who acted as oarsman.

"How does it happen that we found the boat on this side?" asked Markoe. "That seems to prove that Corson is not on the island."

"It don't prove nothin' of the kind," replied the blacksmith. "This boat belongs to Jakey Strow, who ketches fish hereabout, and I allow that anybody who lives on the island or uses it is apt to have a skiff of his own. The man you're huntin' may be thar, and he may not, and that's all I can say fur sartin; but you mought as well keep kinder quiet if you want to ketch him."

Quiet was maintained until the skiff reached the island, when Ryan led the party into the timber. The trees grow close together, the undergrowth was a serious obstruction, and the night had become quite dark.

They had gone but a few rods into the interior, when the blacksmith suddenly halted.

"Dog-gone my skin!" he exclaimed. "I clean forgot to make that skiff fast, and I'm afraid she will go adrift. Jest wait here a bit, gentlemen, while I go and tend to her, and I'll be back here in ten minutes."

He ran back, leaving the party entangled in the bushes, with darkness above and about them.

Ten minutes passed, and he did not return. Ten more minutes passed, and nothing was seen or heard of the blacksmith. When half an hour had elapsed, the men who had vainly awaited his return lifted up their voices and shouted his name; but there were not even any echoes to respond.

"I do believe," said Sharpless, "that the infernal rascal has deserted us."

The others were of the same opinion, and well they might be, as an hour of waiting brought no sign of the blacksmith.

Finally, unwilling to venture any further into the thicket while the darkness lasted, they built a fire where he had left them, and lay down on the ground, supperless, to sleep.

The night passed without giving any token of the presence of the errant blacksmith, and when the next day dawned he was as conspicuously absent.

Hungry and chilly, the four hunters of men arose, unanimously voted their guide a traitor, tried to laugh at the predicament in which they found themselves, but were forced to the sad conclusion that it was no sort of a joke to them.

They proceeded to make an examination of the island, and soon satisfied themselves that it would be idle to search for Moses Corson there.

The island was an irregular oval in form, less than two acres in extent, heavily timbered, and abounding in bushes and vines. It was a very

pretty and pleasant little island, but was not inhabited, and never had been inhabited, nor were there any signs of any sort of human occupation.

"It is clear that that confounded blacksmith has swindled us," said Markoe, when they had finished the survey.

"No doubt of that," rejoined Sharpless. "I am sure that he put this job up on us before we left Blackman's Bayou."

But complaints and repinings would not mend the matter, and they circled around the island until they came to the place where they had landed. There was no boat in sight, but they saw something that gratified them exceedingly, although it increased their annoyance by confirming the treachery of their guide.

On the beach, in plain sight, were piled the provisions which they had brought from Blackman's Bayou, and which had been left on the main-land with the horses.

"We should thank the fellow for not leaving us here to starve," remarked Sharpless.

They built a fire on the beach, cooked and ate a late breakfast, and made themselves as comfortable as they could, closely watching the other shore, in the hope of attracting the attention of some passer-by, who would release them from their ignominious bondage.

CHAPTER XXVI.

AN UNREWARDED RESCUE.

DETECTIVE Sharpless and special agent Markoe were not the only persons who had cause to suspect the stalwart blacksmith of playing a double part.

When Walter Preston had secured his precious letter, and had finally separated from his false friend and leader, he sought Sam Ryan, to express his gratitude for the suggestion which had so pleasantly cleared his path, and to ask further advice. As the blacksmith had advised him to such good purpose, it was reasonable to suppose that some more suggestions from the same source would be valuable.

Ryan received his visitor very cordially, and congratulated him upon the fortunate result of his visit to Grosse Tete, but disclaimed any credit for special sagacity.

"It just happened so," he said. "Of course I couldn't guess thar was any such letter, or that Vaudrey Lavanne would open his head and tell you about it; but you have made a lucky hit, all the same, and now you may be sartin that you are on the right track."

Walter replied that he knew that he was on the right track, but that he did not know how to follow it, and that he was hoping to get some information on that point from one who had previously given him such good advice.

"In fact," he said, "I want to find Mr. Corson, and rely upon you, who know the country and the people so well, to tell me how to search for him."

The blacksmith hesitated, and shook his head.

"Mebbe the colonel ain't in these parts now," he said. "I reckon I mought show you how to find him, if he is hereabouts; but you must promise to do jest what I tell you, and nothin' else."

Preston readily promised.

"You will have to wait a while, then, afore you do anythin'. I've agreed to guide those other chaps on a hunt arter the same man to-morrer."

"Indeed!" exclaimed Walter, who was beginning to doubt the disinterestedness of his adviser. "I don't understand this at all. Do you know those men want to arrest him?"

"That's what they say."

"And that they charge him with being a counterfeiter?"

"Well, if he is a counterfeiter, he ort to be ketched ortn't he?"

"And you, who profess to be his friend, as well as mine, mean to guide those men to him?"

"That's as it may turn out. I mean to guide 'em that way, anyhow. But you hain't got no call to worry about me, young man. All I say is that you must wait a bit. I start out with those chaps 'arly in the mornin', and you musn't start out till arternoon. Then you will git to Jack Harris's in time fur supper and a night's rest, and the next night you will be at Enoch Wurtz's, and I reckon you won't have to go much furdur."

The blacksmith gave the young gentleman such directions as would enable him to reach the first of the places he named, and said that the mention of his name would secure such accommodations and guidance as might be required.

Walter clearly perceived an intention on the part of the blacksmith to deceive either him or the party of four; but he preferred to believe that he was not to be the subject of deception. So he endeavored to possess his soul in patience, and waited for the time that had been appointed. He saw Sam Ryan leave the little settlement with the party of self-styled hunters, and wondered what would be the upshot of that expedition; but his wondering brought him to no conclusion.

Early in the afternoon he set out alone, well mounted, but without any supplies such as the others had carried.

He easily found his way to the small plantation which was known as Jack Harris's, and was hospitably entertained by its owner, to whom he mentioned the name of Sam Ryan. Supper and lodging and breakfast were supplied him, and payment was refused. He was also furnished with such plain directions as would enable him to reach his destination, which was supposed to be Enoch Wurtz's.

In the morning he again set forward, a little vexed by the delays he had encountered, but thankfully feeling that his lines had been cast in pleasant places, and that the name of Sam Ryan was a passport to the favor of the people of those parts.

Shortly before noon the road which he was following led him for a little distance along the shore of a lovely sheet of water, in the center of which was a small island, and he stopped to gaze at this unexpected and pleasing sight. As he stopped, he was saluted by a shout.

"Hello!" came from the island.

He looked across the water, and saw four men on the island, all of whom were waving their hats and handkerchiefs. He answered the hail, and asked what was wanted.

"Come and take us off!"

"Who are you?" he asked.

"Come and see!"

He thought that he recognized the voice, though he could not make out the face of the shouter at that distance.

"How can I get there?" he asked.

"Look for a boat!"

Walter dismounted, tethered his horse, and searched the shore for a boat. As he was thus engaged, he saw four horses hitched near the shore, unsaddled, and with the remains of a feed of corn before them. He rightly concluded that the four horses belonged to the four men on the island.

He was also quite certain that he knew the four men, and seriously doubted whether he ought to bring them off. But they had been his companions for some time, and the spirit of comradeship prevailed, perhaps aided by that of curiosity.

After a brief search he found a skiff concealed under some bushes, and rowed it over to the island, where he met, as he had expected, Sylvester Markoe, Benjamin Sharpless and their two assistants.

They briefly explained the circumstances that had led to their imprisonment on the island, and thankfully permitted the young man to row them to the main-land. When they were safe on the shore and saw that their horses were safe, their gratitude took the shape of inviting their deliverer to join them at dinner, and he thought that he would lose nothing by accepting the invitation.

While this meal was being cooked and eaten, Sharpless had nothing to say to Walter Preston, and little to say to any one else. He eyed the young man suspiciously and seemed to be meditating quite seriously.

After dinner his purpose became unpleasantly manifest to the person whom it concerned.

Preston arose and bid his companions good-by.

"As our paths take different directions," he said, "I will now leave you, hoping that you may not soon be caught in such another scrape."

"Wait a moment," said Sharpless, as he rose from the ground. "I have something to say to you. As your path brought you to this place, just as our path brought us here, perhaps you were sent on the same errand that we were sent on."

"I have been sent on no errand," coldly replied Preston.

"I noticed at Blackman's Bayou that you were pretty thick with that rascally blacksmith."

"No more so than you were," retorted Preston.

"I judge that you were thick enough with him to have put him up to the game he played on us."

"Are you losing your senses, Mr. Sharpless?" demanded Walter. "You talk very strangely. From the little I have seen of that man I am sure that he needs nobody to put him up to anything. If I had had a hand in the game, as you call it, would I have been likely to bring you ashore?"

"You might, and you might not. Anyhow, I believe that you want to be on good terms with the man we are after. For fear that you might try to defeat our plans, I think it best that you should remain with us."

"That is just what I don't think," tartly replied Preston.

"Well, as there are four of us and but one of you, it looks as if you will have to abide by the opinion of the majority."

"Would you really, Sharpless, treat me so shabbily, after what I have just done for you?"

"As we are on important business, we must do all we can to make ourselves safe. For that reason, young man, we will have to hold you."

"You will have to get me before you hold me," sharply replied Preston, as he drew his pistol and backed toward his horse.

"Get around him, some of you," ordered Sharpless.

"Don't let him escape."

"Whether you are in joke or in earnest," remarked Preston, "somebody is going to get hurt if this thing is carried much further. I told you, Sharpless, that if you should try to cross my path there might be an accounting between us. Your conduct is just what may be expected from a man who can lie and steal without a twinge of conscience."

"Grab him!" shouted Sharpless, exasperated by the young man's taunts.

"The first grab will send a bullet through your body," said Walter, as he covered his late leader with his leveled pistol.

The situation was seriously interesting. Walter Preston's Kentucky blood was up, and there was not a particle of fear in his composition; but he was being outflanked by two men, while two others confronted him, and it was to be expected that he would soon be overpowered when the struggle began.

At that moment a new actor came on the scene.

This was no other than Sam Ryan, the stalwart blacksmith, who appeared at Preston's side as if he had risen out of the ground, and he, also, carried a revolver ready for use.

"I reckon you had better leave that young feller alone," he said.

"That cursed blacksmith!" exclaimed Sharpless. "Look here, you rascal; we have had too much of your interference already."

"That's my look-out," rejoined Ryan. "You'll be apt to git enough of me afore you're through with me."

"Let's take them both," said Sharpless. "Are you with me, Markoe?"

The special agent did not show any ardent inclination for an encounter, and Ryan by a menacing movement drove back the two flankers.

"You had better go easy," said Ryan. "We two have got you two kivered, and I'm keen to bet that we can horn-swoggle all four if it comes to a fight. Lead on your crittur, Mr. Preston, and I will keep a watch on these chaps."

Preston and the blacksmith backed away from their antagonists, watching closely for any hostile movement; but there was no attempt to molest them, and they safely reached a bend of the road where they were out of range, and where Ryan's horse was found. Then they mounted and rode away, striking into forest paths where the others

could not have followed them if they had been so inclined.

As they rode on, Walter listened with much interest to such explanations as the blacksmith saw fit to give of his expedition with the Sharpless party, and of his appearance at the time of the attack upon his young friend. There was no more question concerning the side which Ryan was disposed to favor.

It was near sunset when they came to a region of well-cultivated fields, and at last they reached a large and fine house—not such a mansion as that at Grosse Tete, but a handsome building for that part of the country, with many outbuildings and spacious and well-cared-for grounds.

"This is Enoch Wurtz's," said Ryan, as he reined up in front of the house. "You are sartin to be welcome here, Mr. Preston; but the old gentleman is a bit partic'lar, and I had best go in fust and tell him that company's come."

Walter waited patiently outside until his companion returned with servants, who took care of the horses. Then he was led into the house, and was hospitably received by Enoch Wurtz, a well-preserved and hearty old gentleman. Supper followed, at which meal Mr. Wurtz favored his two guests with his company, but none of his family appeared. After supper Walter found himself so tired and drowsy that he was glad of a chance to go to bed, where he slept soundly until daylight.

In the morning, as he stood on the veranda, wondering when breakfast would be ready, he was accosted by his host.

"I believe that your name is Walter Preston," said Mr. Wurtz.

Walter confirmed him in this belief, and he pointed to a door.

"There is somebody in there who has been inquiring about Walter Preston."

Walter at once thought of Sharpless, and instinctively felt for his pistol.

"I don't think it is anybody who wants to hurt you," remarked the old gentleman, and Walter boldly opened the door.

CHAPTER XXVII.

REUNITED.

"I AM very sorry," said Juliet Lavanne, as she rode away from the doomed log house with Mr. Corson, "that you are taking so much trouble on my account."

"It is not on your account," replied Corson. "If there were really any loss, my carelessness would be responsible for it. But there is no loss. That building has served its purpose, and the time has come when it is no longer needed."

"What will be done with it, Mr. Corson?"

"It will simply disappear, and its disappearance will be quite a puzzle to your cousin Hector, I am thinking, and perhaps to some other people."

Corson smiled and chuckled as he pictured to himself the blank looks of Hector Lavanne when he should come to visit the scene of his brief imprisonment.

"Where are we going now?" asked Juliet.

"Just now we are going to get some breakfast, and I hope that a ride in this fresh morning air may give you a good appetite."

They did not ride far before they reached a small farm-house where Corson was evidently acquainted, and where a good breakfast of bacon and eggs and biscuits and coffee was served to them.

When they had finished their breakfast, they again mounted their horses, and rode away.

Juliet had noticed with pleasure that her friend was not only acquainted with the people whom they had thus far met, but was respected by them, and she remarked upon this fact when they had left the farm-house.

"Oh, yes," he replied: "I know many people about here, and they treat me well."

"One might suppose that you were a resident of this part of the country," said Juliet.

"Do you mean that for a question? I am a resident, Miss Lavanne, of nowhere; which is the same as saying that I reside everywhere. My home is where I happen to be. But, as regards this country, I have some interests here. I own some property, including a pretty large piece of land, and the people seem to consider me a fair sort of man."

"No doubt they have reason to, Mr. Corson. Where are we going now?"

"I am now going to take you to a place of safety, to the house of an excellent old gentleman, where you will be well received, and kindly cared for, and abundantly protected, until your affairs can be settled, and I hope that it will not be long before that result may be brought about."

The ride to the place of their destination would have been a pleasant one, if it had not been so long a ride. They beguiled the way with conversation that was more or less interesting, and Corson gave Juliet a description of the people whom she might expect to meet.

At last, late in the afternoon, they reached a large house, with pleasant grounds, and a general air of comfort and prosperity. The barking of dogs and the noisy welcome of colored servants brought to the door a fatherly old gentleman, whom Corson introduced to Juliet as Mr. Wurtz. The old gentleman welcomed them warmly, and led them into the house.

"This, Mr. Wurtz," said Corson, "is Miss Juliet Lavanne, the daughter of your old friend, George Lavanne."

"Indeed he was my friend," said the old gentleman, "and I have never ceased to mourn his loss. I am glad to receive his daughter in my house, and to offer her any assistance that it may be in my power to render her. I have not seen the young lady since she was a baby; but she is strikingly like her mother, as you may have noticed, Col. Corson."

Corson admitted, with a smile, that he had observed the resemblance.

Mr. Wurtz brought in his wife and daughter, a motherly old lady and a young widow, who greeted Mr. Corson as an old friend, and made much of Juliet. Then followed an early evening meal, at which the young lady remarked that she had not had in a long time such a pleasant feeling of being at home.

After this combination of dinner and supper Juliet intimated a wish to retire to rest; but Corson

requested her to wait awhile, as he had sent for a neighbor whom he was momentarily expecting.

The neighbor soon arrived, and proved to be an elderly gentleman of distinguished appearance, whom Corson introduced to Juliet as Judge Tourmin.

"Surely, Miss Lavanne," he said, "you must have heard of Judge Tourmin—Francis Tourmin—one of the first lawyers in the State."

Juliet was compelled to admit that her long absence had seriously limited her knowledge of her native State, but was happy to meet Judge Tourmin.

"I hope that the acquaintance may be more than agreeable to you," said that gentleman. "At the request of Col. Corson, I have been looking into your affairs, and have no doubt that you are the rightful owner of Grosse Tete. It is my opinion that steps should be at once taken to establish your right, and I have prepared the necessary papers in an ejectment suit against your uncle Vaudrey. I have only waited for your authority to send a messenger to Grosse Tete to serve the legal papers."

"If Mr. Corson has advised the proceeding," said Juliet, "you have my authority to do as you think best."

This matter of business being settled, Juliet was allowed to go to bed and enjoy a peaceful and undisturbed sleep.

In the morning Mr. Corson met her with a smile, and showed her a paper, which he said had just been brought to him by a messenger.

"What does it mean?" she asked, when she had read it without the least comprehension of its contents.

"It means that Walter Preston has been staying at Blackman's Bayou, a point on the Mississippi, not a long distance from here, with Sharpless the detective and some others who are searching for me. Yesterday morning he took it into his head to go to Grosse Tete."

"For what purpose?" asked Juliet.

"That is not explained; but I am glad he has gone there, as he may learn something that will be to his advantage."

"What can he learn? My aunt Alma will be sure to snub him, my uncle Vaudrey will tell him nothing, and if he meets my cousin Hector there may be a collision between them."

"Possibly he may get his eyes opened. If he does not, we must try to find some way of opening them."

Juliet Lavanne had no cause to complain of her sojourn at the Wurtz place, as the house and plantation were known in the neighborhood. Mr. Wurtz and his family were exceedingly kind to her, Judge Tourmin was excellent company, and Moses Corson's assurance put her at ease concerning her situation and prospects. Her only troubles were those connected with Walter Preston, for whose safety she feared, and whose probable misconstruction of her conduct was a matter for serious reflection.

Judge Tourmin had sent a messenger to Grosse Tete, to serve upon Vaudrey Lavanne legal notice of the demands of his niece, and it was settled that the ejectment suit should be pressed forward as rapidly as possible. But Juliet had strong doubts of the successful termination of the suit.

"It seems to me," she said, "that nothing can really be done unless the declaration of trust, of which Mr. Corson has told me, can be found."

"It is true," replied Judge Tourmin, "that the loss of that document is a great obstacle in the way of regaining your rights. While it is missing, your uncle may be able to fight us off for a long time, if not to win in the end. If it could be found, there would be no more difficulty. But we must hope for the best."

During the second evening of Juliet's stay at this harbor of refuge there was an arrival which occasioned a little quiet excitement in the family.

Mr. Wurtz was called to the door by a man whom he recognized, and whom he brought in to Moses Corson. After a little conversation that gentleman escorted Juliet to her own apartment.

"There are some strangers here who claim the hospitality of the house," he said, "and I think it advisable that you should not meet them at present. In the morning, if you have any curiosity concerning them, it shall be satisfied."

The young lady professed a lack of curiosity, and an entire willingness to confide all her interests to her faithful friend; yet she waited rather anxiously for the beginning of the next day.

Mr. Corson had a consultation with the elder of the two guests, when the younger had retired for the night, and the effect of that consultation was to clear his brow of clouds and add a fresh smile to his face.

When Juliet arose the next morning, she found her friend waiting for her, and he led her into the parlor on the ground floor of the house.

"There is a person here," he said, "who has been inquiring about you, and seems to be anxious to meet you. If you will wait here a few minutes, I will send the person in."

"What sort of a person is it?" she asked. "I hope it is not somebody from Grosse Tete."

"I can at least assure you that it is not your uncle Vaudrey or cousin Hector."

"Is it Walter, Mr. Corson? Is it Walter?"

"What an excitable young lady you are, and how quickly you jump at conclusions! If you will have a little patience, you will soon know who it is."

When Juliet was left to herself, she tried to control her excitement; but the possibility that the "person" whom she was about to meet might be Walter Preston had taken entire possession of her. He was the only person whom she would care to see, with the exception of Hannah of Grosse Tete, and she knew that Mr. Corson would not allow her to be seen by people who would be likely to annoy her.

In a few minutes she heard voices outside on the veranda, and her heart jumped as she thought that she recognized one of them. She listened, and was sure that the voice which had struck her attention was the voice of Walter Preston.

How should she receive him? No, there was no question of that. How would he receive her? Did he still misconstrue her motives, and had he learned to hate and despise her? If so, why had he sought her?

She waited with a fluttering heart, and the seconds

were much more than minutes until the door which she was eagerly watching opened quickly, and her lover entered.

A glance at his face told her that there was no anger there—nothing but true love and rapturous joy.

"Juliet!"

"Walter!"

They rushed into each other's arms as if their separation had been one of months and years, rather than of days and weeks; but so much trouble and doubt and fear had been crowded into the short time, that their frequent and fervent embraces were surely excusable.

"How did you find me?" asked Juliet. "Where did you come from? Have you not hated or doubted me? Did you not get the letter I wrote you?"

"How can I answer so many questions at once?" replied Walter. "If you will give me time, I will answer them all, and more, as I have much to tell you, and suppose that I have much to hear from you. But I don't know where to begin. I have never hated you, and have doubted no one but the man you have called your best friend. But that was because I had a false guide and counselor, who lied to me and put me on the wrong track. I did not get your letter until the other day, after I had made a visit to Grosse Tete."

"Of course it is a long story," said Juliet, "and before you begin it I want to bring Mr. Corson in, that he may hear it all."

"I am ashamed to meet him, Juliet, though I have been anxious to find him. I treated him so shamefully at Vicksburg, that he can never forgive me."

"You do not know him, Walter. He has spoken of you very kindly, and you must see him."

Juliet brought in Mos a Corson, whose face was calm and serene and unruffled as he gave his hand to the young man.

"We have met before," he said, with a smile, and Walter was abashed by both the word and the look.

"Least said, soonest mended," he remarked, as Walter began to speak stammeringly. "I see that you want to say something about that unfortunate affair at Vicksburg; but it may be as well to leave it unsaid. I assure you that the matter does not trouble my thoughts."

"How can I ever ask your forgiveness," said Walter, "for the great wrong I have done you?"

"You do not need to ask it. It is already granted, for the sake of this young lady, if not for your own sake."

"I will try to atone for my error, Mr. Corson. I will publish a card in the Vicksburg papers, telling the public what a hot-headed fool I was, and how manly and noble was your conduct."

"You will do nothing of the kind, young gentleman, if you wish to please me. It is quite likely that I may never see Vicksburg again. If I should, those who know me well will think no less of me than they did before. As for the others, if any man among them should labor under the delusion that I can be insulted with impunity, I will speedily convince him of his mistake. Let that matter drop, Mr. Preston, and tell us all that has happened to you since you came South, or so much of it as you are willing that I should hear."

CHAPTER XXVIII.

MISLAPS OF THE "HUNTERS."

BENJAMIN SHARPLESS was in a meditative mood after the escape of Walter Preston and Sam Ryan, and was vexed to the very core of his heart. He began to believe that fate was against him, and that his two-fold purpose of justice and revenge was liable to be defeated.

Sylvester Markoe and the others were not so intensely disgusted at the termination of the affair, and commended themselves for their discretion in not beginning a scene of bloodshed. Their discretion had also had its effect upon Sharpless, who had perceived that his backing was not such as it should be, and was unwilling to precipitate a collision in which he was almost certain to become the first victim.

He reflected that it was possible for the pursuit of justice to be too zealous, and for a revenge to be too costly.

Yet his recent failure and the uncertainty of the future were exceedingly vexatious, and he was determined not to abandon his efforts to unearth Mississippi Mose and bring him to an account.

"What are we to do now?" asked Markoe, who usually deferred to the opinions of his strong-willed associate.

"We must try to pick up our spilt milk," replied Sharpless. "If you fellows had backed me up properly, we might have nabbed that confounded swindler of a blacksmith."

Markoe observed that one or more of them might have had an end put to their nabbing days, and that was what the nabbing would have amounted to.

"Well, the chance has gone by, and we won't quarrel about it. Now, if you will take my advice, we will go on and search for Mississippi Mose, and I believe that we will soon find him."

"Where shall we look for him?" asked Markoe. "It seems to me that we are more in the dark than ever."

"There is one thing that may have escaped the notice of you fellows. When young Preston was eating with us, he dropped a remark which led me to infer that his journey was to end at the house of a man named Enoch Wurtz. It is my opinion that when we reach the house of the man named Enoch Wurtz we will find both young Preston and Mose Corson, and we can surely find that house. We had better follow the road the blacksmith took, and inquire our way at the first habitation we come to."

This advice was accepted, as nothing better offered, and the party mounted and rode away toward the west.

But they did not get directions as easily as they had hoped to, and became bewildered among the forest roads, so that they were finally compelled to reconcile themselves to the hard fact of passing another night in the woods.

In the morning they discovered, greatly to their disgust, that they had been camping within gunshot of a farm-house, where they might have secured quarters for the night, if they had but known it.

At the farm-house they got not only directions,

but a guide who accompanied them over a portion of the route, and set them fairly on their way. Then they rode on, without any further misadventure, until noon, when they reached the plantation of Enoch Wurtz.

The dogs barked as noisily as ever; but the negroes eyed these new-comers suspiciously, and it was not until the barking brought out the proprietor of the house that they could safely dismount.

Sharpless, who usually acted as spokesman for his companions, represented them to be a party of hunters, strangers in Louisiana, who had lost their way, and desired rest and refreshment.

Enoch Wurtz ran his eyes over the group and was only a little less suspicious of them than the negroes had been. They did not have the appearance of such hunters as he was accustomed to see; but they were strangers, and his hospitable home was never closed against any.

"I don't know you," he said, "but you seem to be gentlemen, and you are welcome. Walk in, and the best the house affords is at your service."

The old gentleman directed the servants to take care of the horses, and led the strangers into the house, where they were supplied with everything necessary for refreshing them after their long ride and their two nights of camping out. Soon a bountiful dinner was spread for them, and Mr. Wurtz fulfilled his duty as a host by taking his place at the head of the board.

When he had satisfied his inner man, detective Sharpless proceeded to question his host concerning the business that had brought him there.

"Do you know a gentleman named Moses Corson?" he asked.

Yes, Mr. Wurtz was well acquainted with "Col. Corson."

"Quite a popular man about here, is he not?" inquired Sharpless.

"As a landowner, and one of the liberal stripe, he has his friends."

"A landowner, hey? I suppose, then, he resides in the neighborhood?"

Mr. Wurtz replied that "Col. Corson," as far as he knew, had no fixed place of residence.

"Have you seen him lately, Mr. Wurtz?"

"Quite lately."

This looked like getting on, and the countenances of the detective and his companions grew brighter.

"Can you tell us where he is now?" asked Sharpless.

"I could, if I were so inclined."

"Have you any objection to telling us?"

"Possibly. He might not care to see you. If I knew your object in seeking him I would be better qualified to decide that point."

Sharpless reflected. It was evident that he would get no more information from Mr. Wurtz without declaring his purpose, and the disclosure must be made sooner or later.

"Perhaps you will not object to answering my questions," he said, "when I assure you that they are asked in the name of the law."

"Indeed! What has the law to do with Colonel Corson?"

"I am sorry to have to inform you, Mr. Wurtz, that he is accused of being a counterfeiter and in league with a band of counterfeiters."

"I don't believe it. You might as well accuse me, or my neighbor, Judge Tourmin. We are as likely to be counterfeiters as Colonel Corson is."

"That is neither here nor there. We have proofs against him, and it is our duty to arrest him."

"If he should now be in this house," indignantly demanded Mr. Wurtz, "would you violate my hospitality by arresting one of my guests?"

"We would be sorry to violate your hospitality," replied the detective; "but our duty must be performed. If you refuse to give us any further information we will be obliged to search the house."

"You need not trouble yourselves, gentlemen."

This quiet remark was not made by Mr. Wurtz, but by Moses Corson, who entered the room at that moment and approached the table.

"You are my prisoner!" exclaimed Sharpless, starting from his chair.

"Don't be too sure of that," replied Corson.

"I arrest you, Moses Corson," said Sylvester Markoe, as he also rose from his seat.

"Do you? Who are you and where is your warrant?"

Markoe was compelled to admit that he had no warrant, but claimed that his authority was sufficient, as he was a special agent of the Treasury Department, and his companions were officers detailed to assist him.

"You should know your duties better," said Corson.

"If you were the Secretary of the Treasury himself, backed by the Attorney-General of the United States, or even the sheriff of this parish, you could not arrest me without a warrant."

"We will see about that!" exclaimed Sharpless, angered by Corson's cool and aggravating tone.

"We do arrest you, and you are our prisoner."

The door again opened and Sam Ryan entered and placed himself at Corson's side.

"Won't you arrest me, too?" he asked.

"Of course we will," replied Sharpless. "I accuse you of a conspiracy to defeat the ends of justice."

Again the door opened and Walter Preston entered.

"Perhaps you will arrest this gentleman," said Corson.

There was no reply.

"Or you may prefer to arrest these," he said, waving his hand toward the windows.

Sylvester Markoe and his companions looked around. At each of the three windows of the dining room were two men, armed with rifles, the muzzles of their weapons resting on the window sills.

"Mr. Preston, you may retire with Sam Ryan," said Corson. "I don't believe that any further arguments are needed to convince these gentlemen that unlawful games cannot win in this latitude."

The blacksmith and Walter Preston left the room.

"And now," said Mr. Wurtz, "as you have made such a poor return for my hospitality, I have no delicacy in informing you that I prefer your room to your company. Your horses are at the door, and the sooner you get away the better."

Sharpless and his companions left the house without any more words, and mounted and rode away, disgusted with what they had seen and heard, and

ready to believe that the whole country was in league with Mississippi Mose.

The party stopped at a farm-house long enough to allow Sharpless to write a letter to Hector Lavanne, in which he detailed the pursuit and discovery of Moses Corson, and the failure to capture him. There was no doubt, he said, that Juliet Lavanne, or Miss Lessing, whichever Hector chose to consider her, was with Corson, and both could be captured with sufficient force. Would Hector Lavanne persuade his father to raise the necessary force? If so, Sharpless and his friends would soon be at Grosse Tete, ready for further operations.

A boy was hired to take this letter to Grosse Tete, and the discomfited "hunters" again rode on.

Near sunset, as they were entering a reach of forest, they were suddenly surrounded by a large body of mounted men, more than fifty in number, white and black; and apparently of all conditions of society that were to be found in that latitude.

Before Sharpless and his companions could make a move in any direction, these men filled the road before and behind them, and they found themselves covered by so many rifles and pistols that it would have been madness to attempt to resist; so they suffered themselves to be seized and bound.

"What does this mean?" demanded Markoe.

"What have we done?"

"It means," replied a tall man who acted as spokesman of the party of captors, "that you are a pack of horse-thieves; that you stole the horses that you are riding up in Arkansas; that you ran them across the line night before last; and that now you have been caught with the stolen property under you."

"Horse-thieves? We? You are greatly mistaken. We are a party of United States officers, on public business."

"Pretty looking officers you are. That dodge won't work. The men who lost the horses are here, and this picnic is going to wind up with a hanging bee. Bring on the ropes, boys!"

Markoe and his companions in vain protested, and entreated, and claimed the right to prove their innocence. Their voices were drowned by the clamor of the crowd, ropes were placed about their necks, and they were led under the giant branch of an enormous oak.

A man had climbed the tree to tie the ropes to the branch, when the ears of the victims of this summary proceeding were greeted by a voice that seemed to them to have a familiar sound.

"What's goin' on here?"

And Sam Ryan, the stalwart blacksmith, rode into the midst of the crowd.

"We are going to hang the men who stole those horses up in Arkansas," replied the spokesman.

"Oh, you've made a mistake. These ain't the men. I know 'em well. They've been stayin' at Blackman's Bayou, and they hired the horses there."

"If you vouch for them, Sam, it is all right; but they are nice subjects for a hanging bee."

"Let the scalawags go," said Ryan, and their arms and horses were returned to them, and they were set free.

CHAPTER XXIX.

MIDNIGHT PROWLERS.

HECTOR LAVANNE was in a very bad humor after his return from his unsuccessful expedition with detective Sharpless.

It was bad enough that she whom he had hoped to make his wife had played a trick upon him for the purpose of going to meet a man old enough to be her father; but his greatest annoyance was caused by the doubt whether Harriet Lessing was his cousin Juliet Lavanne. He did not believe that he could have fallen in love with a person whom he detested so thoroughly as he did his cousin; yet he had fallen in love with Harriet Lessing, and if Harriet Lessing was his cousin, he had frequently abused her to her face.

His buggy was secretly brought home, during the night that followed his return, and was left in the grounds, no horse being attached to it. Nothing more was needed to convince him of the reality of his strange nocturnal adventure, in spite of the disappearance of the log house to which he had been taken; but it was not necessary to believe that Harriet Lessing was Juliet Lavanne. She had said that she was, but that, as he argued, was not the first false statement she had made to him. Therefore, he still refused to believe that he had fallen in love with his cousin.

Somewhat to his surprise, he found in his father an easy convert to his opinion.

Vaudrey Lavanne had brought himself to the conclusion that Sharpless, if not a swindler, was at least a very unreliable person.

It is always easy to dislike those who seek to make us believe what we are unwilling to believe, and the master of Grosse Tete had been by no means pleased with the detective's confident assertions of the identity of Harriet Lessing with Juliet Lavanne.

There had been no positive proof of that identity, outside of the letter which Sharpless had exhibited; but Walter Preston had come forward and declared that he had never received any such letter, and Vaudrey Lavanne gladly inferred that it had been a skillful forgery by the detective for the purpose of supporting his assertions.

He related to his son the particulars of Preston's visit, and they canvassed the matter together, and settled down to the conclusion that Harriet Lessing was a beautiful siren, whose statements were not to be relied upon, and whose intimacy with Moses Corson was by no means in her favor. The father was glad that the son had escaped her clutches, but the son was by no means disposed to relinquish his pursuit of her.

In all these doubts and complications Mrs. Lavanne found fresh cause for recriminations and direful predictions.

She reminded her husband that she had frequently warned him against Harriet Lessing, and had foretold trouble as the result of that girl's introduction into the house; but her warnings and her advice were never heeded.

"But she has done no harm," insisted Mr. Lavanne, "and I am not at all sure that she has even attempted to do any."

"The worst is yet to come," solemnly replied his wife, and when the worst comes you will be obliged to admit that my predictions are worth something.

I also warned you against that old tramp who came here under the pretense of searching for buried treasure."

"What harm has that old fellow done?" asked Lavanne. "He did search for treasure, and he found some."

"But he has not come back to claim it, and that is what I consider a very suspicious circumstance."

Vaudrey Lavanne tried to make sport of these doleful outgivings; but they caused a gloom to settle upon the family circle, and two troublesome problems yet remained unsolved.

Why had Miss Lessing left Grosse Tete, and what had become of Juliet Lavanne?

The latter question was soon answered. It was at least certain that she was alive.

A court messenger came to the house to serve papers upon Vaudrey Lavanne in an ejectment suit in which Juliet Lavanne was plaintiff, and he was defendant. The plaintiff demanded possession of the property known as Grosse Tete, and an account of the profits and income of the same since the death of George Lavanne.

It was evident that she believed that she had rights, and that she meant to insist upon them; but where was she?

The messenger was asked but he knew nothing about her, as he had no connection with the case beyond the duty of serving the papers.

The suit had been begun in the civil court of the parish in which Grosse Tete was situated, and the lawyer for the plaintiff was Judge Tourmin, a gentleman of the best legal and personal reputation. He would surely not have instituted a suit in her behalf without seeing her and securing her personal authorization. Therefore Juliet Lavanne did exist, and her purpose was decidedly hostile to her uncle's family.

Vaudrey Lavanne sent directions to his lawyer for the defense of the suit, and the only immediate inconvenience he experienced was the necessity of explaining the state of affairs to Hector, who had been hitherto kept in the dark as to the ownership of Grosse Tete.

"You should have told me this before," said Hector, "as nobody has a deeper interest in this business than I have. I am willing to give Miss Lessing the go-by, and to hunt up my cousin and marry her, rather than lose Grosse Tete. But I don't know where to look for her."

For this magnanimous resolution he was duly praised by his parents, and he soon had a chance to begin to act upon it.

Another messenger came to Grosse Tete, bringing a letter from detective Sharpless, addressed to Hector Lavanne.

This letter was read and commented upon in the family circle, and Hector strongly urged his father to allow him to raise a force for the relief of Sharpless and his party, and to aid them in the capture of Moses Corson and his companion.

"I don't see why we should put ourselves to any trouble about those people," said Mr. Lavanne. "The capture of Moses Corson would be of no benefit to us, no matter what he is charged with. Besides, I have reason to distrust that man Sharpless."

"But the girl," insisted Hector, "we may have something to do with her."

"If the girl is Harriet Lessing, Hector, I am sure that I want nothing more to do with her."

"But suppose she should be my cousin Juliet? You must know, sir, that Judge Tourmin lives near the Wurtz plantation, where the girl is thought to be. The chances are that she is either Juliet Lavanne, or is trying to pass herself off as Juliet Lavanne, and that point ought to be settled. If she is Juliet, I don't know what is to hinder me from marrying her, if we once get hold of her."

Looking at the matter in this light, Vaudrey Lavanne agreed with his son, and assured him that he should have sufficient money to enable him to assist the Sharpless party. It was agreed that he should leave Grosse Tete for that purpose the next morning.

At a late hour that night, when the family were about to retire, a negro came to the house with a report that there were suspicious characters prowling about the grounds.

"Dey's down nigh de grave-yard, Marsa Vaudrey," he said. "Dey's got a lantern, an' it stands to reason dat dey ain't dar fur no good."

"How many are there?" asked Mr. Lavanne. "Are they white or black?"

"Dey's free or fo', an' I reckon dey's white; but I was skeered, an' I didn't stay aroun' dar."

Mrs. Lavanne brought up her prediction about the treasure-seeker; but her husband was sure that that old fellow meant no harm, and that he would not be likely to return with a party.

But the intruders must be looked after, and the overseer was summoned. He and the two Lavannes armed themselves with rifles and pistols and sallied forth, accompanied by two reliable negroes.

The moon was shining, and it was not easy to imagine what need the prowlers had of a lantern. But, as the party from the house were passing through the little grove that screened the burying-ground, they saw the light of a lantern at a little distance beyond.

Hector proposed that he should go and reconnoiter, to ascertain what was going on, and was allowed to do so.

He moved forward silently and cautiously, until he reached the edge of the grove, when he dropped behind a clump of bushes.

In a few moments his father saw him bring his rifle to his shoulder, and take a careful aim.

Then came the sharp crack of the piece, followed immediately by a woman's scream.

"My God, Hector!" exclaimed Vaudrey Lavanne, as he ran forward, "I hope you have not shot a woman!"

CHAPTER XXX.

A PERILOUS SEARCH.

"WHAT does it all mean?" asked Juliet Lavanne, who had been excited by the arrival and departure of the Sharpless expedition, and who accosted Walter Preston for the purpose of gratifying her curiosity.

"It means," replied the young gentleman, "that those men wanted to arrest your friend Corson, whom they accuse of being a counterfeiter. I know of the accusation some time ago."

"Do you believe him to be a counterfeiter?" she asked.

"I have no reason to believe any charge that may be made against him."

"I am glad to hear you say so, Walter. You should be the last person in the world to believe anything against him."

"Yes, indeed, since I accused him so unreasonably at Vicksburg, and he has so kindly forgiven me for your sake. I would be glad of a chance to show you how highly I esteem him, and how ready I am to take his part."

Moses Corson came in, and Juliet questioned him concerning the attempted arrest.

"It is true," he said, "that these men accuse me of being a counterfeiter, but they are a wretched set of bunglers, if they are what they claim to be. They should at least have taken the trouble to procure a warrant before attempting such a task. One of them I recognize as a personal enemy of mine."

"That is Sharpless," remarked Walter. "He does hate you savagely, and it was he who set me against you. I hope to have a good excuse to get even with him yet."

"They have not annoyed me in the least," continued Corson. "I have only wondered whether this performance was in any way connected with the schemes of Vaudrey Lavanne. But even that would be of little consequence, as I have reason to hope, Miss Lavanne, that your affairs will soon be settled to your satisfaction. When that task is accomplished, I will go where my enemies will not be likely to seek me."

"I hope it will not soon be accomplished," said Juliet, "if its accomplishment is to take you away from us."

"But it must be accomplished, and the most important part of the task must be begun at once. We will start as soon as possible, if you are willing, for Grosse Tete."

"Oh, no!" exclaimed Juliet. "I am afraid to go back to Grosse Tete until I can be recognized as its mistress."

"We are not going to see any of the people there, my dear child. That is, I hope we will not meet any of them, and see no reason to fear that we may. We are going there secretly and at night, to follow the directions of the scrap of paper you sent to me, in the hope of finding the lost declaration of trust which will restore Grosse Tete to you. Judge Tourmin will accompany us, as well as Mr. Preston and my friend Ryan, and you must go to show us the 'baby's playhouse' and the 'kitten's grave.'"

"That will be a nice expedition," said Juliet—"so interesting and romantic, and possibly so profitable. Of course I will go."

It was a long ride from the Wurtz plantation to Grosse Tete, and consideration was necessarily had for the advanced age of Judge Tourmin, as well as for Juliet, who was a young lady fresh from a boarding school, and unaccustomed to that style of traveling. Consequently they made several stoppages on the way, and Juliet, who bore the journey as well as any of them, and was petted and deferred to by all the party, declared that she had not enjoyed herself so thoroughly since she was a child.

Their last stop was made at a house selected by Sam Ryan, just beyond the limits of the Grosse Tete land. Here they rested until the night was well advanced, and then set out on foot, carrying a spade and a pickax and a lantern, the lantern being concealed by Ryan under his coat until it should be wanted.

Through forests and fields went the party of five, looking for all the world, as the blacksmith said, like a pack of coon-hunters or chicken-thieves. They were guided by Moses Corson, who had made himself well acquainted with the topography of Grosse Tete, to the grove where Juliet had found the remains of the play-house which her father had made for her when she was a child.

Here they halted, and Corson carefully unfolded aunt Hannah's scrap of paper, and read it by the light of the lantern.

"Baby's play-house, at kitten's grave. Thence ten steps w. st. Thence thirty-two steps north."

Judge Tourmin examined the paper, and said that he recognized, notwithstanding its feebleness and uncertainty, the handwriting of his old friend, George Lavanne.

"It was for no light cause that he exerted himself to write this in his dying moments," said Corson, "and we must follow his directions closely. Now, Miss Lavanne, if you will point out as near as you can the location of the kitten's grave, we will take that as our starting point."

Juliet easily found the white stone that had marked the kitten's grave, but was of the opinion that it might have been moved.

"It is probably not far from the spot," said Corson, "and will suit our purpose. Mr. Preston, as you are the nearest in size to Col. George Lavanne, will you please start from here, and pace off ten steps toward the west, in the direction that I will point out to you?"

Walter took his stand at the white stone, and stepped off three paces, followed by all except Corson. This brought him to a rotten stake.

"I believe we are all right so far," said Corson, when he came up. "Now, Mr. Preston, please mark off thirty-two paces toward the north, and I will give you the direction."

Walter again stepped off the ground, and had gone about two-thirds of the distance, when he was stopped by the light fence that surrounded the graveyard.

"Go over," said Corson, and he went over, followed by the others.

This pacing brought him to a white marble stone, which had evidently been laid over the grave of a child.

"That is the grave of my baby brother," said Juliet. "I remember it well."

"This must be the point we have been seeking," said Corson. "Take the pick-ax, Mr. Ryan, and lift the stone."

"Must we disturb the baby's grave?" asked Juliet. "We must raise the stone. Your father had a sacred purpose in sending us here."

The tone was lifted, and the blacksmith picked up a tin box which lay directly under it. He opened the box, and disclosed a folded paper.

"Give it to Judge Tourmin," said Corson.

Judge Tourmin opened the paper, read it by the light of the lantern, and declared it to be the very document that was needed to establish the right of Juliet Lavanne to Grosse Tete.

"Then my task is ended," said Corson.

As he spoke, there came a bright flash from the neighboring grove, and the sharp crack of a rifle, and Moses Corson, without a cry, fell back among the graves.

CHAPTER XXXI.

SHARPLESS MAKES A FINAL EFFORT.

HARDLY was the effect of the shot visible, when Sam Ryan darted back to the grove, and quickly returned, half dragging and half pushing Hector Lavanne, whom he violently threw over the low fence.

Vaudrey Lavanne and the overseer, amazed by the tragical termination of their scout, approached the graveyard, and their astonishment was increased when they saw the prowlers whom they had come to expel.

"There is the murderer," said the blacksmith, as he followed his captive over the fence.

"Kill him!" exclaimed Juliet, who had knelt by the side of her prostrate friend.

Hector Lavanne stammered a few words, to the effect that he had supposed that some persons were robbing the graveyard, and that he had aimed at nobody in particular.

"Let him alone!" said Corson, as he raised himself in the arms of Judge Tourmin. "He has only made a mistake, a very natural mistake."

"Cuss all such mistakes and the men who make them!" exclaimed the blacksmith.

"Let him alone!" repeated Corson. "No harm must come to him because of what has happened to me. He intended no wrong, and I am glad that my task has ended so. Promise me, Sam Ryan, and you, Walter Preston—promise that he shall not be harmed because of my death."

They were compelled to promise, though it went sorely against the grain with both of them.

In a few moments Moses Corson breathed his last, and Juliet Lavanne bent over his inanimate form, bathed in tears. Whatever his life might have been, he had proved himself a true friend to her, and she sincerely mourned his loss.

Directly after his death the group received an unexpected accession.

Four men entered the little graveyard, who proved to be Benjamin Sharpless, Sylvester Markoe, and their two assistants.

Sharpless looked around with manifest surprise at the party present, and then glanced at the body of Corson.

"Is that Mose Corson?" he asked. "Is he dead? How did it happen?"

The cause and manner of Corson's death were explained to him.

"What a pity that he should have gone off like that!" exclaimed Sharpless.

"I hope, Mr. Sharpless," said Preston, "that your revenge stops at the grave."

"I suppose it must; but I may have a word to say in this business yet, before it is ended."

Judge Tourmin stepped forward and confronted Vaudrey Lavanne, who had been standing there in silence, as if dazed by his surounding.

"We came here to-night, Mr. Lavanne," said the judge, "on no unholy or unlawful errand, but to search, under the directions given by George Lavanne in his dying moments, for an important paper. That paper is the declaration of trust which explains the terms upon which you have held the Grosse Tete property. We have found it. This is the paper. Do you recognize it?"

Judge Tourmin showed the document to Vaudrey Lavanne, who examined it by the light of the lantern, and admitted that he recognized it.

"This young lady," continued the judge, "is your niece, Juliet Lavanne. I understand that you have had doubts upon that point; but her identity can be easily established. When you are ready to acknowledge her as such, and to admit her right to the ownership of Grosse Tete, she will be willing to make an amicable arrangement with you. For that purpose I will remain in the neighborhood with her a short time."

"Bring her up to the house," suddenly replied Lavanne. "The sooner this business is settled, the better."

"And now, Miss Lavanne," broke in Sharpless, "I suppose you expect to marry this young man who calls himself Walter Preston?"

"I hope to do so," replied Juliet, with a blush.

"You had better reflect before you commit yourself. Would you wish to marry the son of a gambler and a counterfeiter?"

"What do you mean?" asked Walter. "Who is my father?"

"The man who lies dead there."

"Why, you infernal—"

"Be silent, Walter," said Juliet, laying her hand on his arm. "I knew of this before now, and all the words that man could use would not make me lose a particle of my respect for one who has been so true and faithful a friend to me, and who has sacrificed so much for me, even to laying down his life. If Mr. Corson was a gambler, he was not the only one of his class who was of good repute in this region, and I deny that he ever committed a crime. Go your way, Mr. Sharpless, and vent your spite elsewhere. This dead man is beyond it, and his son is above it."

Sharpless did go his way, and his way did not again lead him across the path of the son of Mississippi Mose.

Vaudrey Lavanne was compelled to admit the right of Juliet to the ownership of Grosse Tete; but in consideration of his refraining from causing delay by defending the suit that had been brought against him, a portion of the estate, upon which there was a house, was made over to him. He did not long remain in Louisiana, but sold his allotment, and removed to Texas with his wife and son.

As for Walter Preston, he and his wife are esteemed and loved as the rulers of the fair domain of Grosse Tete, with its numerous servants and dependents.

In the small burial-ground in which he met his death lie the mortal remains of Moses Corson, and the spot is marked by a fine but unpretentious monument.

THE END.

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